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Witch, Fairy and Folktale Narratives in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop [1]

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Once Upon A Time, there lived a witch named Bessie. She hadn't always been a witch but since becoming one she found that her neighbours thought her very powerful and they began to visit her in search of cures and advice. A terrible plague and famine was sweeping across the land and Bessie, who was expecting a child, was afraid. Her husband, and her animals, were suffering from the pestilence. Bessie was in labour when a stranger came in through her cottage door. She was a stout woman and she asked Bessie for a drink, and she obliged. The woman then said "Bessie, your bairn will die, but your husband will mend of his sickness". With that, she left.

Not long after, Bessie was feeling very sorry for herself and began to cry loudly. A man with a grey beard, who carried a white wand, approached her and said "Good day, Bessie. What worldly thing makes you lament so greatly and greit so sairly?" She answered, "Alas! have I not great cause to lament, for our money and possessions are dwindling away, and my husband is sick, and my baby will not live". The gentleman said "Bessie, you have crabbit [angered] God, and asked for

[1] Versions of this paper, entitled "'A stout carline who begged for a drink': The Queen of Elfland as Beggar in the Trial of Bessie Dunlop", were presented at *Beggars Descriptions: Destitution and Literary Genres International Literary Conference*, University of Groningen, The Netherlands (1998), and *'Fantasticall ymaginatiounis': The Supernatural in Scottish History, Literature and*

something you should not have". The gentleman then went away and she saw him enter a narrow hole in the dyke that no earthly man could have gone through, and Bessie was afraid.

The second time the gentleman appeared, he promised Bessie wealth and clothing, horses and cows, if she would deny her Christianity. Bessie said "if I should be pulled apart by horses, I would never do that". The gentleman was very angry with her.

The third time the gentleman appeared, he told her not to speak, or fear anything she was about to see, and when they had gone a little pace forward, Bessie saw twelve beautiful people. The strangers bade her to sit down with them and said "Welcome Bessie, will you go with us?" but she did not answer. When they departed she asked who these people were; "they are the good neighbours that dwell in the court of Elfland, and they desire you to go with them". But Bessie replied, "I see no reason to go with them unless I know why?" "Look at me Bessie. I have plenty of meat and clothes, and I can offer you the same if you will go with me". Bessie was stubborn though and again she refused. Then the gentleman became very angry with her.

Culture Conference, at University of Strathclyde, Glasgow (1999). Thank you to all for the helpful comments given on these occasions.

Bessie continued to meet with the gentleman and he taught her how to make potions and use charms. But she grew curious as to why the gentleman seemed to favour her over anyone else, so one day she asked him who he was and why he came to her. “Bessie, do you remember when you were lying in childbed and a stout woman came to your door to ask for a drink?” “Yes”, she said, “I remember that very well”. “That was the Queen of Elfland, my mistress, who commanded me to wait upon you and to do you good. As for me, my name is Tom Reid and I died in a great battle near thirty years ago, and now my home is in Fairyland”.

At this point it would be gratifying to state “and they all lived happily ever after”, but that is not possible because there is no happy ending for the heroine of this story. Elizabeth, or Bessie, Dunlop, from Lynn in Ayrshire, tried for witchcraft, sorcery and conjuring spirits, was strangled and burnt on 8 November 1576.[2]

Bessie was only one of the 3837 persons known to have faced a formal accusation of witchcraft in Scotland; at least 168 of those confirmed cases involved persons from Ayrshire.[3] Exactly how many of the accused were executed is unclear though at least half of that number seems a reasonable estimate; Bessie was,

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[2] Trial of Bessie Dunlop, 1576, *Books of Adjournal*, NAS JC2/1 f.15r-18r, and Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, part II, 49-58.

[3] Ayrshire statistics are based on Alistair Hendry’s unpublished “Witch-Hunting in Ayrshire” and *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database* at www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches/ which provides the most up-to-date figures on Scottish witch trials.

unfortunately, among the unlucky ones. During the period of the European witch-hunts – between roughly 1450 and 1750 – over 100,000 trials and around 50,000 to 60,000 legal executions took place.[4] Scotland was, relatively speaking, one of the European countries worst affected by the witch persecutions and, as on the Continent, there were peaks and troughs in witch-hunting activities[5] and marked regional differences.[6] Ayrshire experienced several serious bouts of witch-hunting, the first formal trial and execution occurring in 1572. Thereafter a steady pace of accusations continued in every decade and peaked in the 1650s, tailing off dramatically after 1683. Official action against witches was mainly over in Ayrshire after the 1680s though there is evidence to suggest that witch belief was still present into the nineteenth century. Isabel or Bell M'Ghie (1760-1836), a resident of Beith,

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[4] Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 156, Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) 8.

[5] For more on Scottish Witch-Hunts see Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin and Joyce Miller, eds. *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), Brian P. Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2008), P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *An Abundance of Witches* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), Julian Goodare, ed., *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001), Laurence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (1981; Edinburgh: John Donald, 2000).

[6] For Scottish regional studies see for instance, Lizanne Henderson, "Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the *Gàidhealtachd*", *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. J. Goodare, *et al.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 95-118, Edward J. Cowan, "Witch Persecution and Folk Belief in Lowland Scotland: The Devil's Decade", *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. J. Goodare, *et al.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 71-94, Hugh V. McLachlan, *The Kirk, Satan and Salem: The History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Glasgow: The Grimsay Press, 2006), Lizanne Henderson, "The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland", SHR vol. LXXXV, 1: No. 219 (April 2006) 52-74, Stuart MacDonald, *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560-1710* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002).

has been described as the "last of the Ayrshire witches". Like Bessie Dunlop, over two hundred years earlier, Bell was a healer who had clients of every social standing, including the well-to-do. Her particular forte was dairy problems, healing sick people and animals, and providing counter-magical charms.[7]

An interesting feature in many of the Scottish witch trials, including that of Bessie Dunlop, is the abundance of material relating to fairy belief. This is not exclusively a Scottish phenomenon – similar evidence occurs in other countries such as England, Hungary, Italy and Germany – but it is fair to say that Scotland has a remarkable amount of fairylore interspersed within witch belief contexts.[8]

The confession of Bessie Dunlop is, as already mentioned, not the only one in which evidence of fairy beliefs and traditions is found, but it is one of the earliest and among the most descriptive of the accounts that relate fairy encounters. It is also of interest in that it provides the first clear evidence that fairy belief had become entangled with the demonic, well before the assimilation of continental witchcraft beliefs had taken root in Scotland, a process that has generally been attributed to

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[7] A. MacGeorge, *An Ayrshire Witch* (reprinted from *Good Words* for private circulation, London, 1886) 1-12. See also Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, "The Last of the Witches? The Survival of Scottish Witch Belief" *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 198-217.

[8] For a fuller discussion of this see Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2001; repr. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2007).

King James VI's role in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590-1 and the publication of his book *Daemonologie* in 1597.[9]

Embedded deep within Bessie's testimony is the incorporation of a significant amount of narrative plots and motifs that have since become familiar to many of us through the genres of folktale, traditional story, and local legend. Bessie was, in a sense, recounting what we have come to regard as 'fairytale', but what was presumably for her a memorate, a personal experience narrative.[10] James VI was of the opinion that witches made use of tales of the fairies as "a cullour of safetie" for their crimes so that "ignorant Magistrates may not punish them for it". James did not advocate leniency for those who had seen the fairies and thought they should be as severely punished "as any other witches".[11] Bessie Dunlop may well have been drawing upon stories known to her via folktale and oral tradition. It could even be possible that she thought the telling of tales of the fairies and the spirit world might save her from a death sentence.[12] It has also been suggested that Bessie was describing a real "visionary experience" and as such it "was an expression of a vigorous popular visionary tradition rooted in pre-Christian shamanistic beliefs and

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9 Larner, *Enemies of God*, 66-7. See also Edward J. Cowan, "The Darker Vision of the Scottish Renaissance: The Devil and Francis Stewart", *The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland*, eds. I. B. Cowan and D. Shaw (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983) 125-40, and Stuart Clark, "King James's *Daemonologie*: Witchcraft and kingship", *The Damned Art*, ed. Sidney Anglo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) 156-81.

10 On the memorate, see Margaret Bennett chapter 8 below.

11 James VI, *Daemonologie, 1597* (London: The Bodley Head, 1924) 75.

12 Diane Purkiss shares my view that accused witches often drew upon stories they already knew and incorporated them into their own lives and testimonies. See *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000) 88.

practices".[13] Whatever aspects of the confession Bessie actually believed or did not believe can never be known, though it is clear that her inquisitors believed her story.

This is by no means the only witch trial where such indications of deep rooted folkloric material can be detected. Several other confessions could be examined in this way, notably Jonet Boyman of Edinburgh, executed in 1572, who was accused of raising evil spirits at a fairy well near Arthur's Seat in order to learn how to heal the sick. She conjured a whirlwind that brought forth the shape of a man who stood on the other side of the well and gave her the necessary instructions to heal her patients. On another occasion, she predicted the death of a child because "it had gottin ane blast of evill wind for the moder [mother] had not sanit [blessed] it well aneuch" before leaving the house, and so the fairies had found it unblessed and took it away with them.[14]

Alison Peirson of Byrehill, executed in 1588, was visited by her uncle, who now dwelled in Fairyland, and came to teach her medicines and charms. Aside from her uncle, she saw other dead relatives and friends in Elfland. Alison claimed to have been tormented by the fairies over many years. They repeatedly offered to do her good and to never want for anything if only she would "be faithfull and keip promeis" to them. For her refusals to join their company she was , on more than one occasion, temporarily paralysed.[15]

Among those found guilty of treasonable sorcery against King James VI was the schoolmaster John Fian in 1590-1. He was cruelly tortured until he confessed his

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[13] Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) 243.

[14] Trial of Jonet Boyman, 1572, NAS JC 26/1/67, Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 127-9.

involvement in a conspiracy of witches to bring down the King, notably raising storms at sea to sink the King's ships. The chapbook *Newes from Scotland* (1591) reported a rather bizarre tale that was circulating about Fian's failed attempt to work a love spell. The object of his affection had spurned his advances and so Fian persuaded the woman's little brother, a pupil in his school, to bring him a sample of his sister's pubic hair. However, the boy's mischief was intercepted by his mother and he was made to explain what he was up to. The mother, wishing revenge for Fian's lewd intentions towards her daughter, concocted a plan. She cut three hair's from the udder of a cow and instructed her son to hand these over to Fian instead. When the schoolmaster received the hairs, he did not hesitate to perform the love spell, the results of which were not quite as he expected. Instead of the woman he fancied appearing at his door was the cow which was seen by many of the townsfolk "leaping and dauncing upon him" and following him wherever he went. The reporter claimed that this was the moment when John Fian's reputation as a "notable conjurer" first began to grow "among the people of Scotland".[16]

Isobel Gowdie of Auldearn, executed in 1662, went on hunting parties with other witches, was invited to sumptuous dinners hosted by the fairies, and had a spirit who waited on her called the Red Reiver. She described the Queen of Fairies as "brawlie clothed in whyt linens" and the King as "a braw man, weill favoured, and broad faced", while other fairies in her company, the "elf boys", were "little ones,

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[15] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 2, 161-5.
[16] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 2, 209-23, esp. 221.

hollow, and boss baked".[17] The expression "boss baked" carries the sense of diminutive and hump-backed, while her usage of the term "hollow" is strongly reminiscent of another description of a male fairy by Jonet Boyman (1572); he was "wele anewch cled . . . wele faceit with ane baird [beard]" but wasted away like a stick when seen from behind.[18] The motif of fairies with hollow backs also occurs in German and Scandinavian tales, sometimes called the 'ellefolk', while the Inuit of Arctic Canada have stories of people who have no back.[19]

Folkloric elements were often apparent in European witch testimonies as well. The notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) includes several accounts of witchcraft in south-west Germany that similarly have a feel of folktale and traditional storytelling about them. The authors, it might be assumed, were consciously drawing upon the oral traditions of German folk belief, tale and legend, collecting the stories not for their folkloric value but as hard-core 'evidence' of the threat witches posed. For instance, in the town of Waldshut on the Rhine, a woman was up on charges of witchcraft for raising a hailstorm at a wedding. Detested by her neighbours, she was not invited to the nuptial celebrations and so, wishing to be revenged, she summoned a devil to assist her. The devil duly appeared and carried her to the top of a nearby hill where she was seen by some shepherds digging a hole in the ground, urinating into it, and stirring it with her finger. The devil then took the liquid and used it to create a violent hailstorm that rained down on all the wedding guests. While discussing amongst themselves the cause of this terrible storm, they became suspicious when the witch was seen coming into town. The shepherds, having subsequently revealed what they had seen, the guests' suspicions were confirmed and

[17] Trial of Isobel Gowdie, 1662, Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 3, 604.
[18] NAS JC/26/1/67.
[19] Thompson, *Motif Index*, F232.1 fairies have hollow backs, F525.6 Person without back.

she was arrested. On the basis of eyewitness testimony, and her confession that she acted as she did because she had not been invited to the wedding, she was executed.[20]

This paper will attempt to investigate the interface between memorate, folktale and historical record by examining a selection of folkloristic motifs from Bessie Dunlop's witch trial confession, including one of the more unusual features, the 'beggarly' motifs, and specifically the appearance of fairies as beggars, as encountered by Bessie and others.

There are, of course, some problems with using witchcraft trial records such as this one. Although it is a story told by a convicted witch, relating her alleged experiences, it was recorded and written down through the filter of her inquisitors. This leads to the uncomfortable situation that elements of her story may have been distorted, taken out of context, or forced to fit a preconceived stereotype of witch behaviour. On this latter point, the early date of Bessie Dunlop's trial does not readily support the theory of an imposed learned witchcraft stereotype coming from the judges and examiners for no such stereotype had yet been formulated among Scotland's elite. The so-called "cumulative concept of witchcraft",[21] as postulated by Brian Levack, was still in its infancy, in a Scottish context at least, and would not fully develop for another decade and a half. While the trial of Bessie Dunlop does indeed indicate a growing awareness of the demonic powers at large in the world,

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[20] Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (1486; 1928; New York: Dover, 1971) 107.

[21] Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (1987; London: Pearson, 2006) 32.

and is without question a significant indicator of the demonization of witches and fairies in sixteenth-century Scotland, Bessie's account arguably reveals more about contemporary folk belief than intellectual witchcraft theory.

On the reliability of witch trial evidence, as Carlo Ginzburg has argued, "the fact that a source is not 'objective' . . . does not mean that it is useless";[22] we must find alternate ways of reading and dealing with such texts. Interesting work has been done by scholars, such as Ginzburg, Diane Purkiss and Marion Gibson, on how to 'read' witchcraft trials, especially the magical or distrustful elements, to arrive at a "better understanding of the construction of stories of witchcraft and our interpretation of them".[23] Deconstructing witch confessions is often an exercise in trying to know the unknowable.

So what is known about Bessie Dunlop? She was married to Andrew Jack, with whom she had children, and they lived on a farm on the Boyd estate at Lynn, on the outskirts of Dalry, Ayrshire.[24] Bessie almost certainly hailed from an Ayrshire family as Dunlop is a well-known surname in the region, deriving from the lands of Dunlop in the district of Cunningham.[25] It can be surmised from the evidence that in socio-economical terms, the couple were not poor but of the middling sort (even

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22 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (1976; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) xvii.

23 Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 6.

24 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 49. Lynn Glen – variously spelled Lyne, Linn, Lin – is now a local beauty spot on the Caaf Water, close to Dalry.

25 Her husband's surname, Jack, is harder to place and appears to be of no particular provenance. George F. Black, *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning and History* (New York: New York Public Library, 1946).

upper middling); they kept cattle and sheep, had horses, made occasional trips to Edinburgh and Leith for market, and had acquaintances of high social standing. Bessie's age is not recorded at the time of the trial but she was probably in her 30s, at most, based on the fact that she had given birth at least twice within a few years of her execution. She was also a self-confessed charmer and could communicate with the spirit world.

It is not clear how Bessie Dunlop came to be accused of sorcery and witchcraft as the existing records do not plainly state the name of the complainant. However, it can be deduced that problems began for Bessie when a burgess of Irvine, William Kyle, consulted her about a stolen cloak and she told him that the culprit was Mally Boyd, also a resident of Irvine, who had since refashioned the cloak into a kirtle. Though Kyle had promised no harm would come to her for revealing the name of the thief, he renegued on his word and the next time she came to the Irvine market, she was seized and put in the Tolbooth. Bessie was not, however, without influential friends. James Blair, brother of William Blair of the Strand,[26] came to her assistance, having her released from the prison. Her problems may have deepened when she accused two blacksmiths, Gabriel and George Black, of stealing plough-irons[27] from Henry Jameson and James Baird of the Mains of Watterton and taking the stolen property to their father's house at Locharside. The indignant blacksmiths brought a

[26] The Strand is a prominent street in the town of Beith, Ayrshire, traditionally the spot where market days were held and presumably the home of William Blair.

[27] The iron parts of the plough e.g. the coulter.

complaint against Bessie to the Archbishop of Glasgow, James Boyd of Trochrig,[28] to clear their good name. It is implied in the record that Archbishop Boyd was favourable towards Bessie, perhaps believing her claim against the blacksmiths to be well-founded. Nonetheless, irreparable damage seems to have been done to Bessie's reputation. When a third set of charges was brought against her, by person or persons unknown, she was not so fortunate; this time no one would come to her rescue.

Bessie was taken before the High Court of Justiciary in Dalkeith 20 September 1576 and sentenced to death at Edinburgh on 8 November, a severe verdict considering that she was adamant in court that she refused offers to go to Fairyland or to enter into any ungodly pact.[29] Furthermore, she argued that she herself had no kind of "art or science" but that all her knowledge was obtained from a man by the name of Tom Reid, whom she maintained had died at the Battle of Pinkie twenty nine years earlier on the 10 September 1547, and who now dwelt in the court of Elfland under the control of the Fairy Queen. Unusually, she was not found guilty of practising *maleficium* – harmful magic – or entering into a demonic pact; crimes that were to become standard in witchcraft accusations as the witch-hunts progressed. Her crime lay in the "using of sorcerie, witchcraft, and incantatioune,

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[28] The Archbishop of Glasgow (1572-81), James Boyd of Trochrig (family home in Girvan Parish), born 1534, died 21 June 1581, of whom it was said that he "strenuously defended the lawfullness of his office against the insults of our first zealots". He was the second son of Adam Boyd of Pinkill, brother to Robert, Master of Boyd, who was, according to Pitcairn, the landowner of the Lynn estate where Bessie Dunlop resided. Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, 55; James Paterson, *History of the County of Ayr: With a Genealogical Account of the Families of Ayrshire*, 2vols. (Ayr: John Dick, 1847) vol. 2, 79.

[29] *Books of Adjournal*, NAS JC2/1 fo. 15r-18r, Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 58.

with invocatioun of spretis of the devill; continewand in familiaritie with thame, at all sic tymes as sche thought expedient, deling with charmes, and abusing the pepill with devillisch craft of sorcerie".[30] Bessie was not charged with any form of malefice – she never physically hurt anyone – but rather was convicted for her charming and healing abilities and her supposed close relationship with a ghost and with the fairies, associations that were becoming dangerously unacceptable in sixteenth century Scotland. Only a month before Bessie was incarcerated, intolerance towards magical practitioners was expressed by the Privy Council when they issued a proclamation against "Egyptians" or gypsies, denouncing them as "ydle vagaboundis" who live wicked and mischievous lives, committing murders, theft, and "abusing the sympill and ignorant people with sorcery and divinatioun, to the greit offence of God".[31]

The fact that many of Bessie's clientele came from the local elite and landowning classes does not seem to have swayed the members of the assize, nor did any of her former clients seemingly appear at court in her defence. Among her customers was Lady Johnstone,[32] who sought Bessie's assistance when her daughter, the wife of the Laird of Stanelie,[33] became ill. After consultation with Tom Reid, who diagnosed the young woman had a "cauld blude [cold blood]" that went around her

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[30] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 51.
[31] "Egiptianis", 27 Aug. 1576, RPC, vol. II, 555-6.
[32] Lady Johnstone is almost certainly the wife of Sir William Wallace of Johnstone and Auchenbothie. William M. Metcalfe, *A History of the County of Renfrew from Earliest Times* (Paisley: A. Gardner, 1905).

heart "that causit hir to dwam [swoon or faint] away", he prescribed a potion of ginger, cloves, aniseed and liquorice mixed with strong ale. Bessie made the medicine as instructed and gave it to Lady Stanelie to drink while she was at the house of her sister, Lady Blackhall.[34] Presumably the treatment worked as she was paid a peck of meal and some cheese.[35]

On another occasion Bessie was asked to visit the Lady Kilbowie[36] who was suffering from a crooked leg. This time, Tom Reid advised Bessie that nothing could be done as the leg would never mend because the "merch of the bane was consumit [the bone marrow was wasted away]".[37] Lady Thridpairt,[38] in the barony of Renfrewshire, sent for Bessie to ask if she could reveal the name of the thief who had stolen "twa hornis of gold, and ane croune of the sone, out of hir pyrse?"[39] After consulting Tom, Bessie named the thief and the stolen money was returned to its

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33 Lady Stanelie is possibly the daughter of William Wallace of Johnstone. There is a Stanelie, or Stainley, in the parish of Ardrossan, though it is more likely a reference to the Maxwell family estate at Stainley Castle in the parish of Paisley, Renfrewshire.

34 Her sister may have been Margaret Wallace, Lady Blackhall, daughter of Sir William Wallace of Johnstone, who was married to James Stewart, 8th Baron, of Auchingoun, Blackhall and Ardgowan. James Stewart received a Royal Charter in 1579 confirming his lands as feudal barony, including the family home of Blackhall, situated one mile south-east of Paisley Abbey. Blackhall Manor is the oldest house in Paisley, dating to the 12th century, and was the Stewart family residence until c.1700. Janet S. Bolton, *From Royal Stewart to Shaw Stewart: Their Story* (N.p: Nenufra, 1989); 'Blackhall Manor', www.renfrewshire.gov.uk

35 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 54.

36 Kilbowie is situated in present day Clydebank, West Dunbartonshire.

37 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 54.

38 The lands of Thirdpart, in Renfrewshire, were sold by John Crawford to William, Lord Semple, in 1523. George Robertson, *A Genealogical Account of the Principal Families in Ayrshire* 2 vols. (Irvine: Cunninghame Press, 1823) vol. 1, 179.

39 The "two horns of gold" may refer to a unicorn, a gold coin struck in the reign of James III, *Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary*. The "crown of the sun" (*ecu d'or au soleil*) was a French coin, first struck in the reign of Louis XI in 1475, William Shaw, *The History of Currency* (1895; Boston: Adamant, 2005) 401. In Scotland c.1501, it was valued at 14s.6d. E. Gemmill and N. J. Mayhew, *Changing Values in Medieval Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 128.

owner within twenty days. The chamberlain of Kilwinning, James Cunningham,[40] paid Bessie a visit following the theft of some "beir [barley] that was stollin furth of the barne of Cragance [Craigends]" and she was able to tell him where it was. When various items of clothing and linens started to go missing from Lady Blair's house, she had the servants beaten, until she consulted with Bessie who discovered, via Tom Reid, that the servants were innocent and rather it was "Margaret Symple [Semple], hir awin friend [relative]" that was stealing from her.[41]

Another member of the Blair family – but of the Beith branch – William of the Strand, received a visit from Bessie when she was instructed by Thomas Reid to deliver a message to him. William Blair's eldest daughter was due to be married to the young Crawford Laird of Baidland.[42] However, Bessie came to tell him to call the match off otherwise his daughter would go mad and "die a shameful death", committing suicide by throwing herself off a cliff. Bessie's dire warning was heeded and the Laird of Baidland agreed to marry Blair's youngest daughter instead.[43]

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[40] James Cunningham, Laird of Ashinyards (land in Kilwinning parish he acquired in 1567). James's father was Gabriel Cunningham (c.1515-1547), 3rd Laird of Craigends. Aged around 18, Gabriel attended the trial for murder of his father William, 2nd Laird of Craigends, by William, Lord Semple, 17 Nov. 1533. In 1543 the feud between the Cunninghams and Semples was not yet over when Gabriel was accused of the murder of John Semple of Auchinlodmont. Among Gabriel's accomplices was William Wallace of Johnstone. Gabriel was killed in 1547 at the Battle of Pinkie. Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 164, 167; Register *of the Privy Seal*. 8 vols. (Edinburgh: General Register House, 1908-1982) vol. 3: 81, no. 538, 541, 559.

[41] Lady Blair is most likely Grizel Semple (1551- unknown), daughter of Robert, 3rd Lord Semple, and Elizabeth Carlisle, who married John, Laird of Blair, on 8 Feb. 1573. Paterson, *History of the County of Ayr*, vol. 1, 414.

[42] Possibly Andrew Crawford who, according to Paterson, married a daughter of William Blair of the Strand, Paterson, *History of Ayrshire*, 419. The Crawfords of Baidland are now of Ardmillan. The most famous Crawford from the period was Captain Thomas Crawford of Jordanhill, see note *****

[43] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 56.

Bessie does not seem to have been engaged in midwifery, though when asked if she ever provided assistance to women in labour, she disclosed that she could do nothing for them until she had spoken with Tom who gave her green silk lace "out of his awin hand" and instructed her to tie it around the their left arm, underneath their clothing.[44] Bessie further revealed that when she was giving birth to her last child, Tom came into her house, offering words of support, though she does not mention whether he gave her a lace for her own arm.

All of the healing and knowledge that Bessie garnered for her well-to-do patrons she learned from her ghostly associate, Tom Reid, her conduit to the otherworld. Just who exactly Thomas Reid was remains unclear but Bessie's four-year relationship with this man became a central feature of the interrogations. She claimed that she first met him, sometime in 1572, while driving her cows to pasture, at a spot between her home and the yard of Monkcastle.[45] She was crying and distracted with worry for she had very recently given birth but her baby, and her husband, were seriously ill. A man approached and hailed her: "'Gude day, Bessie'; and she said, 'God Speid you, gudeman'. 'Sancta Marie' said he". He asked her why she was crying and she told him of her troubles; her property was dwindling, her husband was fatally ill, she knew her baby would die soon, and she herself was at a weak point having recently been in child bed. "Haif I nocht gude caus thane to haif ane sair hart?" Tom replied that she must have angered God by questioning him. His

[44] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 54.
[45] Monkcastle House, south of Dalry, Ayrshire.

advice was to make amends to the Almighty for he predicted that before she returned home her child would surely die, as would her cow and two sheep (thus predicting emotional as well as economic loss), although her husband would make a full recovery. Bessie confided that although she was initially heartened by the revelation that her husband would get better, she became afraid when she saw Tom Reid depart through a narrow hole in the dyke that no ordinary man could have passed through. At this point, it seems, she first realized that Tom was not of this world.

The initial encounter, as portrayed by Bessie, is curious in that the stranger called out to her using her first name, though she in turn addressed him politely with "gudeman".[46] Of course, this could simply be an accident of the manner in which the evidence was recorded. But, if this is indeed an accurate account of how Bessie narrated the meeting, it opens up a number of questions. Was Bessie lying about having never met or heard of Thomas Reid before? If so, why? The confession reveals that Tom had been sent to wait upon Bessie by the Fairy Queen and so, from Bessie's point of view, the meeting was no accident; he did already know of her.

A further notable aspect of the initial meeting was that Thomas Reid greeted her with a catholic salutation "Sancta Maria". It has been suggested, unconvincingly,

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[46] Thompson, *Motif-Index*, N762 Person Accidentally Met Unexpectedly Knows the Other's Name. The term good/guid/gude-man had various meanings in Scots, see DOST. Bessie was presumably using it in the sense of politely addressing a person. However, it was also used to denote a woman's husband, the occupier of a mill or keeper of the tolbooth (jailer), or towards an owner or tenant of a property, especially of a small estate or farm, ranking below the 'laird'. It was also used euphemistically as a name for the Devil. The 'gudeman's croft' was a plot of uncultivated land dedicated to the Devil.

that perhaps Thomas Reid was actually a catholic priest, "compelled to live under a feigned character" within the new protestant regime.[47]

The conditions under which they first met are intriguing and further emphasize the folktale quality of the narrative, as well as conforming to standard sixteenth century popular beliefs about fairies. In keeping with Scottish tradition, the period surrounding pregnancy and childbirth was considered a dangerous time for women, not only from a medical point of view, but also from the potential threat of supernatural attack. It is tempting to suggest that Bessie may have secretly believed that her baby had not died of natural causes but was 'taken' by the fairies. The presence of the Queen of Elfland during the birth of her ill-fated child, followed up very shortly by a visitation from the ghostly Thomas Reid – both of whom foretold the death of her child – would suggest such a possibility. Thus Bessie was able to explain to herself, and possibly to her accusers, in meaningful terms, the loss of her child, the beginnings of her relationship with the otherworld, and the onset of her healing powers.

There are countless examples, from the historical and folkloric record, of supernatural powers granted to humans as a result of contact with fairies. There is nothing in the record of Bessie Dunlop's trial to suggest that she was a practising charmer previous to her encounter with the Queen of Elfland and her minion,

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47 Paterson, *History of Ayr*, vol. 1, 411-12. Paterson accompanies the trial of Bessie Dunlop with a story entitled 'Willie Mackie and the Ward Witches', a local legend dated to the first half of the 18th century. Ward Farm is by Dalry. For an excellent discussion of the religious situation in Ayrshire, during the Reformation era, see Margaret H. B. Sanderson, *Ayrshire and the Reformation: People and Change, 1490-1600* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997).

Thomas Reid, and so it would seem plausible that the explanation for her healing abilities and second-sight was a direct result of this meeting. It is also possible that Bessie turned to charming, sometime around 1572, in order to supplement the family income. By her own admission, things were tough at home with sickness, death, and the loss of livestock. She referred to her husband and child lying sick in the "land-ill", which is an obsolete term denoting famine, a pestilence or plague, or some other epidemic.[48] Scotland in the second half of the sixteenth century was marked by intense periods of famine and economic inflation. Local shortages were so acute in some places that grain had to be imported to cope with the dearths. There was an outbreak of plague in the later 1560s and severe famine during the years 1570 to 1575.[49] In 1574, infectious disease was so rampant that Edinburgh forbade the traffic of sick persons to and from the city on pain of death; "being informit of the greit inconvenient liklie to follow be spreding of the infectioun of the pestilence to landwart, throw the departing of seik and fowll personis".[50]

That Bessie was alone and overcome with worry, crying out loud about her predicament, when Thomas Reid showed up, is reminiscent of the folktale hero's encounter with a supernatural helper. For instance, in "Rashiecoat", the Scottish variant of "Cinderella", the protagonist is at a low point when a fairy/animal helper

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48 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 51 note4.

49 S. G. E. Lythe, The Economy of Scotland in Its European Setting, 1550-1625 (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 17-18; Alex. J. S. Gibson and T. C. Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 12.

50 Act 'Anent the Pest', Dalkeith, 31 Oct. 1574, RPC vol. II, 1569-1578, 415.

arrives to offer advice.[51] Similarly in "Whoopity Stoorie" or "Ceann Suic", Scottish Lowland and Highland variants of "Rumpelstiltzchen", the hero, usually a woman, is lamenting her misfortune at an impossible task that has been put to her when the supernatural helper appears and offers to do the work for her. However, the offer comes with strings attached, such as the loss of her child if she cannot come up with the helper's name after a designated space of time.[52]

The circumstances surrounding the initial meetings between Bessie, the Queen of Elfland, and Thomas Reid may have had certain resonances with the learned ideas of her inquisitors and their interpretation of these characters as none other than devils in disguise. In sixteenth-century European demonological thought the Devil reputedly appeared in times of trouble in order to lure people into witchcraft. The Devil would offer them assistance with their problems in return for their allegiance, demanding that they renounce their baptism and acknowledge him as their sole master.[53] Jean Bodin, a French lawyer and author of *Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580), was convinced that people were drawn into witchcraft through their own sins, such as "avarice, envy, drunkenness, wantonness", and "for reward in this world" the Devil "forces them to renounce God and to worship him and to kiss his rear in the form of a he-goat or some other foul animal . . .; he transports his slaves at

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[51] 'Rashiecoat' in Robert Chambers, *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1826), and 'Rashin-Coatie' in George Douglas, *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales* (1901; New York: Dover, 2000) 86-9.

[52] AT 500 'The Name of the Helper'. For "Rumpelstilzchen/Rumpelstiltskin" see *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1992); for 'Ceann Suic' see A. J. Bruford and D. A. MacDonald, *Scottish Traditional Tales* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994) 110-12; for "Whoopity Stoorie" see Hannah Aitken, ed. *A Forgotten Heritage: Original Folk Tales of Lowland Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973) 61-4.

night to commit filthy acts".[54] The demonologists regularly discussed, in vivid detail, the sexual relationship that many witches allegedly had with the Devil, though there was widespread disagreement as to the exact nature of these intimate encounters. In a Scottish context, the sexual element, though present in elite discourse on the activities of witches, cannot be described as an essential ingredient in witchcraft confessions, but neither was it absent. A Musselburgh woman, Janet Daill (1661), confessed to meeting the Devil whom she said appeared "in the likeness of ane man with grey clothes who promised to give her money". She consented to become his servant and give herself to him although she knew who he really was. The next time she met him "the Devil had carnal dealing with her and caused her renounce her baptism".[55] In this case, as in others like it, sexual contact was a method of sealing the Demonic Pact as well as demonstrating full obedience to the master.

In keeping with stereotypical witchcraft narratives of encounters with the Devil, Thomas Reid fulfilled at least one characteristic demand; the rejection of christianity. Tom offered Bessie the promise of wealth and prosperity if she would only "denye hir Christindome, and the faith sche tuke at the funt-stane [baptism]". Her refusal to commit such an act of apostasy provoked him to anger, but she would not succumb to his coercions, even if, as she put it, she should be "revin at horis-

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53 See, for instance, Nicolas Remy, *Demonolatry*, trans. E. A. Ashwin (1595; London: Rodker, 1930) Book 1, chapter 1.

54 Bodin was complementary of the "praiseworthy custom of Scotland" called "Indict", a form of acquiring evidence from informers, via a box that was placed in church into which anyone could deposit a piece of paper with the name of a witch and details of their crime. Jean Bodin, *Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580) *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. R. A. Scott and J. L. Pearl (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1995).

taillis".[56] However, when Bessie was asked if she had carnal dealings with Thomas, or had been in a "suspect place" with him, she insisted that her relationship with him was purely platonic, though she said that once he "took hir by the aproun, and wald haif had hir gangand [going] with him to Elfame". Apparently, this episode had taken place at her own home, while her husband was in the house sitting, for some unexplained reason, with three tailors. Thomas appeared to her, at the auspicious hour of twelve noon, and "he tuke hir apperoun and led hir to the dure [door], and sche followit, and geid [went] up with him to the kill-end [Kiln], quhair he forbaid hir to speik or feir for onye thing sche hard or saw".[57] Moments later Bessie was introduced to twelve "gude wychtis", or fairies. The meaning here is unclear, though there is a hint that Tom's physical gesture of leading her out of the house by her apron, away from her husband, may have been regarded as inappropriate social behaviour towards a married woman; a sexual innuendo or come-on.[58] However, from a supernatural perspective, his touch may well have been the method that enabled Bessie to see the otherwise invisible 'good neighbours', a relatively common

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55 Trial of Janet Daill, Edinburgh, 29 July 1661, NAS JC/26/27.

56 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 52.

57 Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 52, 56.

58 'To hold by the Apron-Strings' carries a sense of property, but neither the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, or the *Dictionary of Slang* record an explicit sexual meaning for the phrase. However, a song from an English play "The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub'"(1664), written by Restoration playwright George Etherege, suggests the phrase may have been popularly understood to have sexual connotations: "He took her by the Apron/To bring her to his beck; But as he wound her to him/the Apron-strings did break". Michael Cordner, *The Plays of Sir George Etherege* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 35.

fairy motif. For instance, Robert Kirk, author of *The Secret Common-Wealth* (1691), stated that one way to see the fairies was to touch a person with second-sight.[59]

Other accused witches, such as Alison Peirson (1588), whose confession bears some similarities with Bessie Dunlop's, also claimed to have had a non-sexual relationship with a male ghost, whom she said was her uncle, the source of her medicinal knowledge, and her primary contact with the fairy world. Of course, there are examples where sexual contact had been confessed to, such as Andrew Man (1598) who claimed a long-term relationship with the Queen of Elfland and had children by her. The union between confessing witches and the Devil was sometimes described as aberrational in some way, such as Margaret Lauder (1643) who stated that when she eventually succumbed to the Devil's repeated advances, he "lay with hir eftir ane beistlie maner lyk a doig".[60] What could be said is that in all of these examples the supernatural consort was a figure of some authority; an uncle, a Queen, the Devil, and in Bessie's case, though few details are known about Thomas Reid it can be assumed he had been a man of relatively high social standing.

The Devil was, of course, a notorious liar and deceiver, and so it comes as no surprise that Bessie was questioned as to why she should have believed that Tom Reid was telling her the truth, particularly about having been at the Battle of Pinkie. After all, she claimed "she never knew him when he was alive". I have so far been unable to confirm if a Thomas Reid fought and died at Pinkie, though Bessie stated

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[59] Robert Kirk *The Secret Common-Wealth*, 1691, ed. Stewart Sanderson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1976) 64.

[60] Trial of Margaret Lauder, Edinburgh, 29 Dec. 1643, S. I. Gillon and J. I. Smith, eds., *Selected Justiciary Cases, 1624-1650*, 3 vols. (Stair Society, 1954-74) vol. 3, 611-12.

that if she should ever doubt his claim, she should seek out his son, also named Thomas, who had succeeded his father in the household of the Laird of Blair, "and to certain other [of] his kinsmen and friends", to confirm his identity. At the time of Bessie's trial, the Laird of Blair was John Blair (1547-1609) whose father, also John, did in fact die at the Battle of Pinkie in 1547. Whether or not he died at the side of Thomas Reid remains a mystery.[61]

It should perhaps not go unnoticed that in 1575 John, Laird of Blair, entered into a "band of mutual assistance" with Robert, Lord Boyd (brother of the Archbishop of Glasgow, James Boyd) who was, according to Pitcairn, also Bessie's landlord.[62] Furthermore, John, and his brother William, were convicted on 21 May 1577 of "shooting with pistols" at Captain Thomas Crawford, "and his servants for their slaughter". They were then taken to Blackness Castle as wards until John paid a fine of five thousand pounds and William two thousand pounds.[63] The feud was of long-standing for in 1510 Humphrey Blair, a cleric, was among several accused before the Archbishop of Glasgow for conspiring in the slaughter of William Crawford of Baidland.[64]

The Battle of Pinkie Cleugh, east of Edinburgh, was the last battle between Scotland and England during the so-called 'Rough Wooing'. Although it featured

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[61] Paterson, *History of Ayr*, vol. 1, 414. Blair Castle, stronghold of the Blair family, is near Kilwinning, Ayrshire. There may have been a family connection between John, Laird of Blair, and the brothers William Blair of the Strand and James Blair who came to Bessie's assistance during her internment at Irvine.

[62] Paterson, *History of Ayr*, vol. 1, 414; Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 49.

[63] Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, vol. 1, 71-2.I have so far been unable to confirm if this is the same Captain Thomas Crawford of Jordanhill (1530-1603) who also resided at Kersland, Dalry parish, Ayrshire. He fought at the battle of Pinkie where he was captured and later ransomed, was a confidant of Lord Darnley, and was actively opposed to Mary Queen of Scots. After Darnley's death, he planned and led the assaults on Edinburgh and Dumbarton castles. In 1577 he became Provost of Glasgow and built the first bridge over the Kelvin River at Partick.

[64] Sanderson, *Ayrshire and the Reformation*, 32.

"one of the largest Scottish hosts in history", with as many as 25,000 men on the field, it proved a devastating defeat for the Scots, with losses of up to 10,000. According to Bessie, Tom Reid referred to the battle as 'Black Saturday', as it was commonly known in Scotland.[65] Pinkie was undoubtedly the iconic event of the 1540s.

Why Bessie should have described encounters between herself and a man who died at this particular battle is intriguing and raises questions about history and memory. Were these her memories or those of the people around her? As in other parts of the country, Ayrshire lost many men at Pinkie, and a number of Bessie's acquaintances had fought or lost family members on that dark day. Had Bessie grown up hearing stories about Pinkie or was she drawing on personal recollections from childhood? Bessie's exact age is unknown at the time of her death in 1576, though, as mentioned above, she was still of child-bearing years. Speculatively, her familiarity with a battle that took place twenty-nine years earlier might suggest that she was a child or young adolescent in 1547. A further possible clue in the confession is that she stated she never knew Tom Reid when he was alive – as opposed to saying he flourished before she was born. Regardless of whether or not Bessie had lived through Pinkie and its immediate aftermath, the dominant presence of one of the

[65] See Marcus Merriman, *'The Rough Wooing': Mary Queen of Scots 1542-1551* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000) 7-10, 233-7, David Caldwell, "The Battle of Pinkie", *Scotland and War AD 79-*

fallen soldiers in her narrative is testament to the enduring power and lasting significance Pinkie had on the Scottish psyche. It also gives her story a ring of truth and believability.

Among the qualities that make Bessie's account more 'believable' as a closer approximation to traditional folk belief is, perhaps, the mundane, matter-of-fact, narration of events and personages. There is very little overt 'magic' in a story that is essentially all about magical occurrences; the natural and the supernatural are effortlessly entwined. The Queen of Elfland, who might be expected to be glamorous and sophisticated, is plainly described as a "stout woman" who asks Bessie for a drink. The eight female and four male "gude wychtis that wynnit in the Court of Elfame", to whom Bessie was introduced, were all well dressed; "the men wer cled in gentilmennis clething, and the wemene had all plaiddis [plaid] round about thame". Their unremarkable appearance was only belied by the fact that they departed in a hideous whirlwind that left Bessie feeling sick. Thomas Reid, though he is a member of the undead, can disappear through a small hole in a wall, and has superior occult knowledge and medicinal abilities, is also described in quite ordinary terms. He was an

> honest wele elderlie man, gray bairdit, and had ane gray coitt with Lumbart slevis [Lombard sleeves] of the auld fassoun; ane pair of gray brekis [trousers] and quhyte schankis, gartanit abone the kne; ane blak bonet on his heid, cloise behind and plane befoir, with silkin laissis drawin throw the lippis thairof; and ane quhyte wand in his hand.[66]

1918, ed. Norman Macdougall (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1991) 61-94, and Gervase Phillips, *The Anglo-Scots Wars, 1513-1550* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999) 191-200.

The enigmatic Thomas Reid is a complex and multifaceted character, potentially representing a variety of folkloric motifs. He exists in a liminal world, at the very gates of Elfland, moving freely between the land of the living and the dead. Though ghosts or spirits of the dead are to be considered distinct from the fairies, both are strongly connected with the Otherworld, and Tom Reid is no exception. He acts as Bessie's intermediary between the fairies, the underworld and this world. Alison Peirson shared a similar relationship with the fairies via the ghost of her uncle, who taught her medicines and charms.[67] The association in the learned tradition between witches and necromancy was long-standing and of biblical origin. Ever since Saul asked the woman of Endor to raise the ghost of Samuel, witches were credited with the ability to communicate with the dead in order to access secret knowledge.[68] Late Medieval and Early Modern theologians and demonologists debated at length whether such acts of sorcery actually constituted the raising of the dead or merely demons in disguise. Bessie Dunlop claimed that "sche hirself had na kynd of art nor science" but habitually would ask Tom Reid, who would supply the necessary information to cure the sick or find lost property. From the point of view of her interrogators, was Bessie fulfilling an age-old stereotype – the witch as a raiser of

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66 Pitcairn, *Criminal Trials*, vol. 1, 51, 53.

67 Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 137-8. In both cases the dead function as supernatural helper figures, Thompson, *Motif-Index*, N810 Supernatural Helpers.

68 'The Witch of Endor' is more correctly a "woman that hath a familiar spirit", 1 Samuel 28: 1-25. In Latin, *familiaris*, or household servant, expressed the notion that sorcerers had spirits at their command.

the dead/demons? Among the charges levied against her was sorcery and "invocatioun of spreitis of the devill"; necromancy is not explicitly mentioned though the charges imply that she was thought to have conjured or invoked Thomas Reid. However, it can be argued that Bessie had an entirely different interpretation of events. According to her testimony, it was Tom who first approached her; she did not claim to have raised or summoned him intentionally. From her perspective, he was sent to "wait upon hir, and to do hir gude" by his mistress, the "Quene of Elfame". The link in the supernatural chain was initially forged by a visitation from a fairy. What is perhaps a little unusual in this story is the casting of the Queen of Fairy in the role of a beggar.

When setting out to study the motif of the fairy as beggar, I initially began by reading through various collections of British and European fairy tales, or more accurately folktales or *märchen*, for what better place to find such examples. However, it quickly became apparent that it is relatively rare to find fairies in the role of beggars. Indeed fairies in fairy tales are rare.[69] Within folktale, beggars are invariably kings in disguise so that they may spy on their subjects, test a princess they wish to marry, or are reduced to begging because they have lost the princess

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[69] There is much confusion and disagreement over the correct terminology, and scholarship is inconsistent. There are many terms in usage, e.g. wonder tale, marvellous tale, German *märchen* and *zaubermärchen*. The term 'fairy tale' is a translation of *conte de fée*, originally referring to translations of literary French tales composed from the 1690s onwards, in which the powerful *fée* (a fairy woman) plays an important role. As many tales do not include the presence of fairies proper, 'fairy tale' should be regarded as a subgenre of 'folktale' ('oral narrative'). See Bengt Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987) *FF Communications No. 239*. 450-1, and Stith

they adore. Sometimes the beggar is a saint or Jesus Christ himself, posing in this guise in order to discover the compassion and kindness, or vice versa, of the people from whom he begs. And sometimes the beggar is an evil sorcerer or malignant queen or stepmother who takes on this persona in order to trick the object of their hatred, usually young maidens, so that they may hurt or kill them.[70]

The fairy in the role of beggar does not appear as a tale type in Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale*, though AT480 "The Kind and Unkind Girls" sometimes involves a request made by a tester-donor in the shape of an old woman or hag whom the girl meets on her journey and by whom she is rewarded if she complies with the request or is punished if she refuses.[71] Nor does it occur in Thompson's *Motif-Index* though fairy in the form of a hag (F234.2.1), fairy grateful for hospitality (F332) or a loan (F335), fairy recovering a stolen cup by posing as a beggar (361.2.1), and the more general, fairies borrowing from mortals (F391), are included.[72]

Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 7-10.

[70] For examples of a king as beggar see "The Maiden Without Hands", and "King Thrushbeard", in guise of a saint or Jesus see "Brother Lustig", "The Poor Man and the Rich Man" and "The White Bride and the Black Bride", and in the form of an evil sorcerer/witch see "Fitcher's Bird" and "Snow White" in Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. Th beggar as helper is present in Thompson, *Motif-Index*, N825.3.1 Help from Old Beggar Woman, N826 Help from Beggar.

[71] This is a familiar tale type in Scotland. For example, a tale associated with Edin's Hall Broch, an Iron Age fort in Berwickshire, tells of a brother who meets an old woman and shares his food with her. She gives him a gift in return for his kindness. Later, the brother encounters the giant Edin who has turned his two brothers to stone. He uses the old woman's gift, which turns out to be an axe, to slay the giant and release his brothers from enchantment. Joyce Miller, *Myth and Magic* (Musselburgh: Goblinshead Press, 2000) 176-7.

[72] Thompson, *Motif-Index*; Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica , 1961).

In Scottish folktales the motif of the fairy as beggar, while not common, does indicate some sort of discernable pattern. Generally, the narrative involves the appearance of a solitary fairy who requests food, drink, implements, or some other sort of assistance from a human, such as borrowing a mill to grind grain, or a woman to nurse her children or act as midwife. The person to whom the request is made is then either rewarded or punished, depending upon their reaction to the request.[73] W. Y. Evans-Wentz recorded, if the fairies were "refused milk or meat they would take a horse or a cow" but if they were "well treated they would repay all gifts".[74] Sometimes the request is only made after the human has been deceived into trusting the fairy who has offered to help, but once the help has been given, the fairy demands a hefty reward, such as the person's child or even the person's life. The only way for the person to get out of the bargain is to trick the fairy themselves or meet other imposed conditions such as guessing the name of the fairy; e.g. tale types of "Rumpelstiltzchen", or in Scotland "Whoopity Stoorie".[75] In a Scottish context, it would seem, that the fairies could occasionally become dependent upon their human neighbours, for some things at least.

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[73] Fairy requests a mortal nurse in "Nurse Kind and Ne'er Want" and milk in "A Back-Gaen Wean", Aitken, *Forgotten Heritage*, 14-15. A fairy boy requests ale in "The Laird O' Co", Gordon Jarvie, ed. *Scottish Folk and Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1997). Fairy requests meal in "The Goodwife and the Fairy", Philippa Galloway, ed. *Folk Tales From Scotland* (Glasgow: Collins, 1945) and in two unnamed stories in J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* 2 vols. (1860-1; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994) vol. 1, 425-9.

[74] Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911; New York: Citadel, 1990) 95.

[75] "Whoopity Stoorie" is one of the few occasions when personal names of fairies are divulged; Scottish fairies are frequently nameless. Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 14-17.

So if the begging fairy is relatively elusive and hard to find within the genre of folktale, where else can she or he be found? There are, of course, other sources in which information about fairies has been transmitted, for instance, legends and traditional tales. Legends, unlike folktales, are typically set in a definite time, in worldly, rather than otherworldly, places, and although marvels may take place they call for the hearer's belief in a way that a folktale which incorporates magic does not.[76] Traditional tales, though in many ways they can and often do resemble folktales, are not bound by the same formulaic rules which apply to the latter. It should be stated that these terms are used with a great deal of caution as there is much overlapping between these categories, and one cannot even be sure if the folk who originally told these stories would recognize the desire or the need, which the academic constantly has, for classification and categorisation.

That aside, these kinds of narratives yield more direct examples of fairies in the shape of beggars, and closer parallels to the experience related by Bessie Dunlop. The most frequent patterns to emerge are as follows: A woman is singing and rocking her child/ or she (sometimes he) is alone in the house when a female stranger, dressed in green or something unusual or distinctive, enters the cottage and asks the woman to nurse her baby/ or asks for milk for her baby/ or asks for a bowl of oatmeal. If she obliges she is rewarded but if she does not she is punished. If the fairy woman comes to see a man it is mainly to ask for an implement or tool, or for

[76] On the difference between folktale and legend see Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

permission to use his mill or farm equipment. The issue that is central in these kinds of stories is hospitality.

Recorded from an informant in Kirkcudbright, is the story of a miller's wife who was sitting "rocking her baby to sleep" when she was surprised "to see a lady of elegant and courtly demeanour, so unlike any one she had ever seen in that part of the country, standing in the middle of the room". She had not heard the lady enter the house and "rose to welcome her strange visitor" who was "very magnificently attired" in a green dress with gold embroidery and a "small coronet of pearls" on her head. She offered her a seat, but the lady declined. Rather, the lady asked, "in a rich musical voice, if she would oblige her with a basin of oatmeal" on the promise that the meal would be returned to her. A generous portion of oatmeal was given to the lady who then departed. A little while later, the oatmeal was indeed returned, not by the same lady but by "a curious little figure with a yelping voice; she was likewise dressed in green". Before leaving, the second visitor advised that all the family should partake of the meal. However, "one servant lad spurned the fairy's meal" and died shortly after, confirming the suspicions of the household that the first visitor "was no less a personage than the Queen of the Fairies". Only a few days later, the miller himself received a visit from the shrill-voiced stranger who asked him politely to start up the mill as she wished to grind some corn, promising that everything would

be as he left it the next day. The miller did not dare refuse and in the morning, she had kept to her word and he found everything in the mill as she said he would.[77]

As already mentioned, the humans are generally rewarded if they give the fairy what s/he requests and punished if they do not. In stories where the human has been offered food or drink by the fairy, refusal will result in a punishment, such as blindness, having to perform impossible tasks, or death. On the other hand, the acceptance of the offer will be rewarded, or sometimes simply ignored. The fairy will not harm a human who shows respect and good manners.[78]

However, there is another dimension involved here. Acceptance of fairy food, drink or any other kind of gift can, and often does, lead to enchantment. It is frequently the way in which fairies gain control over humans. Similarly, if the human does not recognize that the stranger who asks for assistance is a fairy and helps without taking any kind of precaution, such as blessing oneself or remaining silent, they too may find themselves enchanted. This, presumably, is the explanation behind Bessie Dunlop's alleged enchantment. Bessie, who was in childbirth, a time when fairies were considered dangerous to both mother and newborn,[79] particularly before

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[77] Story related by Johnny Nicholson, Kirkcudbright, Feb. 1859, in J. F. Campbell, *More West Highland Tales*, 2 vols. (1960; Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1994) vol. 1, 425-6.

[78] J. F. Campbell observed that in some tales the refusal by a guest to accept hospitality until the host has complied with his or her demand was a way of compelling the host to do what would otherwise not be done. Also, in some stories such as "Fear Gheusdo", the fairies are similarly bound by the laws of hospitality, and in many cases a mortal coerces the fairy to execute their commands by simply refusing fairy hospitality until the wish has been fulfilled. Campbell, *More West Highland Tales,* vol. 2, 147, 166.

[79] A woman was considered particularly susceptible to fairy enchantment during and after childbirth, until she had been churched and the baby baptized, and precautions, such as placing iron under the woman's pillow, were quite common. For examples see Robert Kirk *The Secret Common-Wealth,* and

they had been churched or baptized, presumably took no precautions against possible fairy attack. When the fairy arrived at her own bedside she was unable to recognize her as such, understandably enough, given that descriptions of the Queen of Elfland are usually more grandiose and elegant than the "stout" beggar-woman that paid a visit to Bessie. When Bessie gave the Fairy Queen a drink this had the effect of putting her under a spell; she was then visited on a regular basis by another otherworldly creature, Tom Reid, who was also under enchantment.

A similar story of the failure to recognize a fairy in the shape of a beggar was recounted by folklorist Walter Gregor.

> A fisherwoman had a fine thriving baby. One day what looked like a beggar woman entered the house. She went to the cradle in which the baby was lying, and handled it under pretence of admiring it. From that day the child did nothing but fret and cry and waste away. This went on for some months, when one day a beggar man entered asking for alms. As he was getting his alms his eye lighted upon the infant in the cradle . . . 'That's nae a bairn; that's an' image; the bairn's been stoun [stolen]'. He immediately set to work to bring back the child . . .[80]

The fisherwoman, as in Bessie's story, did not recognize the beggar woman to be a fairy, nor did she take precautions to protect her newborn from such an attack. In counter-magical fashion, it is the 'genuine' beggar man who breaks the fairy's spell,

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Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1703; 1716; Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1976).

80 The beggar man successfully restored the human child by holding a black hen over a blazing fire, thus frightening away the fairy imposter. Walter Gregor, *Folk-Lore in North-East Scotland* (London, 1881) 61.

returns the changeling from whence it came, and restores the human child which "throve every day afterwards".

So what is going on in Bessie Dunlop's narrative? How do we classify it, if indeed it should be classified at all? Is this a memorate? Was Bessie, under the influence or threat of torture, drawing upon native folk traditions in her desperation to please her inquisitors? Were the witch hunters imposing such ideas upon her? Or was Bessie recounting a "visionary encounter experience"[81] not unlike that of a shaman or witch-doctor? Judging from the trial evidence Bessie appears to have believed that her experiences were true supernatural encounters, as did her accusers. The level of detail she supplied certainly implies her strong conviction in the reality of these experiences. It is unclear whether or not torture was actually used to illicit her confession; though unlikely, the possibility exists that Bessie was under no duress to say what she did.[82] Basically, it does not really matter whether or not her account is 'true'; what is important is that her contemporaries, and possibly herself, believed it to be true. The question is, how do we reconcile Bessie's sixteenth century story with later collections of folktales and legends which appeared in printed form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, basically the period when people started to collect such folk material for the first time? Bessie's story can clearly be related to

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81 Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*, 243.

82 On the use of torture in Scottish witch trials see Stuart MacDonald, "Torture and the Scottish Witch-Hunt: A Re-examination", *Scottish Tradition* 27 (2002) 95-114, MacDonald, *The Witches of*

folktale, the difference being that she evidently lived the experience while those who told or heard similar stories in the nineteenth century were participants in a form of entertainment. At what point in time the orally-communicated medium of folktale came to be regarded and classified solely as 'fiction' is unclear but such was certainly the widespread opinion by the end of the nineteenth century. It has been suggested that in earlier times the storyteller, and indeed the listener, may not have drawn such "a sharp line between truth and fiction in their narratives". Tale-tellers "could not always make a clear distinction between truth and invention in the folktale" and may have actually believed, in some cases, what they narrated. On the other hand, it has been argued that the artistry and distinctive structure and form of the folktale, as opposed to legends that are based on 'fact', are indicators of the folktales' fictional status.[83]

There is another fundamental question that needs to be addressed; the role of the beggar in this narrative. The beggar is a key element in Bessie's story. It is where her story begins, it is the explanation she gives for the onset of her special powers, and, sadly, it is the reason for her demise.

Fife, 123-42, Brian Levack, "Judicial Torture in Scotland during the Age of MacKenzie", *Miscellany* IV (Edinburgh: Stair Society, 2002) vol. 49, 185-98, Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland*, 21-4;

[83] Andreas Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) 45. On the difficulties of classifying supernatural tales see also Alan Bruford, "Problems in Cataloguing Scottish Supernatural and Historical Legends", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 16/3 (1979) 155-66.

Folktale scholarship has suggested a variety of ways to interpret these stories, and many are reductionist, that is they offer a single explanation e.g. psychological, mythological, anthropological, ethnographical, socio-historical or feminist. But, rather than support one model of interpretation, folktales should perhaps be read, as suggested by Satu Apo, as multi-dimensional; all aspects apply as "the fictitious world and its meanings in folk tales spring from the totality of human life and culture, and not from one of its component areas".[84] However, in Apo's opinion, not even a multi-dimensional examination "can hope to reveal more than a few of their potential meanings".[85] There is ultimately a duality within folktales. They deal with the fantastic and the realistic, with the hopes and fears of their tellers, thus tying them in with reality. Although many of the individual elements may be unrealistic, folktales nevertheless, as Lutz Röhrich contends, look at "real problems" that are relevant to everybody, and "the reason for the widespread use of the tale of magic lies in its everyday relevance".[86] Folktales are complex; "while they might seem naive, straightforward, or simple at first, a closer examination reveals a rich variety of potential meanings and messages". Furthermore, the persistence of "certain folktale plots (tale types) and images (motifs) across time and space is due to the universal

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84 Satu Apo, *The Narrative World of Finnish Fairy Tales* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1995) *FF Communications No.256*. 144.

85 Apo, *The Narrative World of Finnish Fairy Tales*, 149.

86 Lutz Röhrich, *Märchen und Wirklichkeit. Eine volkskundliche Untersuchung* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1956) 195-6.

nature of the problems or questions addressed".[87] Though folktales can be heard and enjoyed as entertainment, they can also provide a glimpse into the interests and concerns of both tale teller and listener.

Folktales, on the one hand, often depict community members helping one another out, albeit in lieu of some form of compensation, but they can also portray tensions and jealousies within those same social groups. Furthermore, the folktale, through the use of 'fictitious' characters and events, can express 'real' feelings and emotions which otherwise would be socially unacceptable to disclose:[88] envy, resentment, lust, and hatred. The folktale "sublimates" reality by stylizing frightful or unsavoury things, and turning them into ornamentation, abstraction, and direct action.[89]

Bessie Dunlop's extension of hospitality to the beggar woman may similarly reflect such a dichotomy. Within Bessie's society toleration of beggars was decreasing and were being viewed with increasing hostility and resentment.[90] Accused witches were themselves often stereotyped in the role of a beggar, harassing their neighbours and cursing them when they did not indulge their demands for assistance.[91] One of

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87 Johns, *Baba Yaga*, 44.

88 Holbek, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, 394.

89 Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time*, 93, 124, 146.

90 On beggars in sixteenth century Scotland see E. J. Cowan, "Scotching the Beggars: John the Commonweal and Scottish History", *The Scottish Nation: Identity and History: Essays in Honour of William Ferguson* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007) 1-17.

91 Larner, *Enemies of God*, 21, 89-102. Alan MacFarlane developed a model for the beggar as witch in his work on the Essex witch-hunts, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (1970; London: Routledge, 1999). However, Lauren Martin has challenged this model as not widely applicable in a Scottish context, in "The Devil and the Domestic: Witchcraft

the charges levied against convicted witch Catherine MacTargett from East Lothian (1688) was begging. When she was displeased with the alms given, she was said to have used threats to get what she wanted. On one such occasion, Catherine cursed a woman who refused to give her any more alms and predicted that the woman would not recover her health until either she died or her newborn baby died. A month later the woman's suckling child passed away and, just as Catherine had stated, the woman made a full recovery.[92] In this instance, Catherine's aggressive begging, and subsequent cursing, was directed at a nursing mother. The woman had obeyed the rules of hospitality, offering the beggar a handful of meal, but she did not or could not protect herself from the witch's curse.

Bessie was faced with a similar paradox: she had a social obligation to the beggar and was under pressure to extend hospitality, but she was also governed by conventions involving encounters with the supernatural and otherworldly beings. Perhaps this part of Bessie's story is a sublimation of inner conflict and resentment generated by the "stout carline who begged for a drink".[93]

Another aspect to the beggar motif that seems to be relatively common is the revelation of secrets; the beggar has second-sight or can see things that others cannot. The prognosticatory ability of beggars is a feature within both Bessie Dunlop and Catherine MacTargett's confessions and is a relatively common motif within

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Quarrel's and Women's Work in Scotland", *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, ed. J. Goodare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 73-89.

92 Trial of Catherine MacTargett, 30 May 1688, RPC, 3rd ser., vol. 13, 245-62.

93 J. A. MacCulloch, "The Mingling of Fairy and Witch Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century

memorate, legend, and folktale in Scotland as elsewhere. A Norwegian tale relates the story of Lasse who went into the forest to cut trees but failed to protect himself from supernatural attack and was transformed into a wolf. Many years passed and his wife assumed Lasse was long dead until one day, a beggar-woman came to her door. The good wife took the unfortunate woman in and gave her food and treated her well. Before the beggar left, she told the wife that her husband was not dead but transformed into a wolf and that she would see him again. That night the wife left out a piece of meat to tempt the wolf to the door and when she saw him approach she said "If I were sure that you were my own Lasse, I would give you a bit of meat", which instantly broke the spell and the wolf-skin fell off, revealing her own husband.[94] Kindness to the beggar has been rewarded with access to supernatural knowledge.

No corpus of folktales from sixteenth century Scotland has survived to provide direct comparisons with Bessie's remarkable story, recounted in horrific circumstances, but other stories like her's would, in the course of time, evolve as a diversion for the nursery or the parlour, a whimsy to send children to sleep, transformed from the wretched reality that 'once upon a time' had sent Bessie to a horrible death.

She has, however, been remembered in other ways. For instance, this particular trial has attracted the attention of scholars through the centuries, dating

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Scotland," *Folk-Lore* 32 (1921): 227-44.

94 Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves* (1865; New York: Causeway Books, 1973) 108-9.

back to Sir Walter Scott, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, Robert Chambers, J. A. MacCulloch and Katherine Briggs.[95] A stage play based around her life, written by John Hodgart and Martin Clarke, *Bessie Dunlop: Witch of Dalry* (1977; rewritten 1995), was first performed in 1977 at Garnock Academy, in Kilbirnie, Ayrshire; a fitting tribute to a local lass.[96] There is a street in Ardrossan called 'Witches Linn' in recognition of local traditions surrounding Bessie's former home. That said, the visitor to Ayrshire today is most likely to be directed to sites associated with the more famous, albeit literary witches, of the Robert Burns poem 'Tam O'Shanter' than to the former haunts of Bessie Dunlop. And there are people still living who claim that, growing up in Ayrshire, Bessie was used as a threatening figure by their parents to encourage good behaviour.[97]

One of the fascinating things about the stereotypical Scottish witch is that there is no stereotype. Each case and every trial has its own dynamic and particular set of circumstances, and every individual person convicted of witchcraft have their own unique story to tell. The confession of Bessie Dunlop reveals that while she may have drawn in part upon local legend and folktale under the duress of the questioning of her inquisitors, rare glimpses of her own life and attitudes shine through.

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[95] My own relationship with Bessie Dunlop has been a long one. I first encountered her while researching my undergraduate dissertation in 1989-90 and was inspired to continue investigating her trial, among others, for my Masters thesis in 1993. See also Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001; 2007).

[96] John Hodgart and Martin Clarke, *Bessie Dunlop: Witch of Dalry* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995) xiii.

[97] Orally communicated.