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Henderson, L. (2006) *The survival of witchcraft prosecutions and witch belief in South West Scotland*. *Scottish Historical Review*, 85 (1). pp. 52-74. ISSN 0036-9241

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/7706/>

Deposited on: 15 October 2009

LIZANNE HENDERSON

The Survival of Witchcraft Prosecutions and Witch Belief in South-West Scotland

Abstract

During the era of the Scottish witch-hunts, Dumfries and Galloway was one of the last regions to initiate witch prosecutions, but it was also one of the most reluctant to completely surrender all belief in witches until a comparatively late date. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries south-west Scotland, better known for the persecution of covenanters, took the practice of witchcraft and charming very seriously indeed, and for perhaps longer than other parts of Scotland, though the area has received surprisingly little scholarly investigation. The trial evidence is not incompatible with that found elsewhere though there is less demonic content. Accusations of witchcraft in this region were mostly concerned with the troubles of everyday life, agricultural problems, family tensions and disagreements between neighbours. From 1670 to about 1740, the very decades that were giving birth to the Scottish Enlightenment, learned interest in the supernatural was actually on the increase and the topic received an unprecedented level of questioning, investigation, and scrutiny. Ironically, the ‘superstitions’ that both church and state had been attempting to eradicate for some two hundred years were now being used to defend religion against the growing threat of atheism. The zeal of the ministers does seem to have contributed to the endurance of witch beliefs in the South West, as elsewhere. Against this backdrop, the survival of witch belief and the continued prosecution of witches in south-west Scotland is examined, thus contributing to our understanding of the individualistic nature of witch persecution and the various dynamics at play within the Scottish witch-hunting experience.

It is generally accepted that after the last great outbreak of persecution in 1661-2, Scotland’s witch-hunting activities went into sharp decline.¹ While this is demonstrably what happened in some areas it was not so in all parts of the country. Nor was it the case that though the number of witch trials and executions lessened, belief in witches and witchcraft was

¹ Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London, 1981), 78-9; Brian P. Levack, ‘The Decline and End of Scottish Witch-Hunting’, in J. Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester and New York, 2002), 166-81.

LIZANNE HENDERSON is lecturer in history at the Crichton Campus of the University of Glasgow. She would like to thank staff at Dumfries and Galloway Archives for their help and support, particularly Marion Stewart and Lucy Gibbon. This paper was originally presented at the *Covens and Covenanters: Witchcraft and Religion in South West Scotland* conference, May 2002, and again at the Scottish History Seminar Series, University of Edinburgh, in January 2005. The author is grateful for helpful comments on these occasions.

any less vibrant than it had ever been. In the decades following the hunt of 1661-2, there was arguably more interest, on the part of the elite and learned, in witchcraft and the supernatural in general, than ever before. From roughly 1670 to about 1740, the very decades that were giving birth to the Scottish enlightenment, the subject of the supernatural received an unprecedented level of questioning, investigation, and scrutiny. Ironically, the 'superstitions' that both church and state had been attempting to destroy for at least two hundred years were now being used, in some quarters, to defend religion against what were perceived to be the ravages of atheism.² The south-west region of Scotland sheds considerable light on the vexed problems of witch belief and witch-hunting, and the tenacity, or otherwise thereof, though the area has received surprisingly little scholarly investigation. The South West comprises Dumfries and Galloway, the former a county in its own right, the latter embracing the shires of Wigtown and Kirkcudbright. In comparison with other parts of Scotland the area was a relative latecomer to witch-hunting. Furthermore, the trial evidence reveals few signs of the demonic—the Devil himself seldom appears. Rather, most cases are concerned with the grind, stresses, sheer drudgery and anxieties of daily existence: disagreements between neighbours, arguments about livestock, family tensions, and the unpopularity of incomers to the community, among others.

As is well known this area acquired a more 'radical' reputation than the rest of the country due to the activities of the covenanters, whose stance in defence of religion in opposition to anglicising tendencies in the Kirk, and what was perceived to be the excesses of Stewart despotism, earned them sustained persecution by the government and increasing marginalization on the part of the Scottish establishment by the 1680s. Indeed, it is probably due to the fascination displayed by presbyterian hagiology for such legendary persecution that the subject of witch-hunting in the south-western counties has been largely ignored, though it is quite well documented, and acquired its first historian as early as 1911.³

The post-Restoration period was one of religious strife and tension throughout Scotland, though arguably at particularly high levels in the South West. From the turbulent years of the 1630s and 1640s to the notorious 'Killing Times' of the mid-1680s, the ideology of the covenant remained crucial to Scottish theology and political theory. The main period of covenanting activity is generally assumed to have ended with the exile of James VII and II in 1688-9, though the influence of the covenanters persisted well into the eighteenth century, and later.⁴

² Lizanne Henderson, 'Supernatural Traditions and Folk Beliefs in an Age of Transition: Witchcraft and Charming in Scotland, c. 1670-1740', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Strathclyde, 2003).

³ J. Maxwell Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland* (1911; Wakefield, 1975).

⁴ See Edward J. Cowan, 'The Making of the National Covenant', in J. Morill (ed.), *The Scottish National Covenant in its British Context, 1638-51* (Edinburgh, 1990), 68-89;

After the Revolution, when presbyterian orthodoxy had been re-established in Scotland, fears of English perfidy remained a source of constant anxiety and unease. The covenanters were to claim, with some reason, that they had anticipated many of the arguments that were reiterated during the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-9, but while the presbyterian establishment appeared to be guaranteed in legislation of 1690, there was cause for concern with the opening of negotiations for union in 1701. The covenants were frequently invoked in response to the perceived threat that such union appeared to pose to the very existence of the Kirk. A number of the more committed brethren and elders, many of covenanting sympathy among them, trapped as they were in an increasingly entrenched position, displayed a tendency to regard the persecution of witches as both a religious and a patriotic duty;⁵ in their view to relax the laws against witchcraft was to oppose the will of God. With this in mind, it is probably no coincidence that there was a fairly serious outbreak of witch cases in the South West at this period. The region had recently seen much persecution and bloodshed and from the earliest years of the eighteenth century was intent upon the mythologisation, to a greater or lesser extent, of its recent past.⁶ It is possible, however, to detect signs of profound change in the attitudes of clergy, the elite, and eventually the folk at large, towards witch-hunting, although not towards witch belief, for there is strong evidence for the existence of known witches in Galloway well into the nineteenth century.

Stories about witchcraft abound in the South West: in the sixteenth century the poet Alexander Montgomerie wrote of the 'venerable virgines whom the world call witches';⁷ In the eighteenth century, Allan Cunningham collected the story 'The Witches Tryst'; while a Mr. McWilliam communicated a version of 'The Witch of Kirkcowan' in the late nineteenth century.⁸ Locharbriggs Hill, outside Dumfries, was only one of many sites throughout the south west of Scotland which was associated with the legendary of witches. Some places had several, and even competing, associations: John Gordon Barbour debates the origins of

⁴ (Continued) Edward J. Cowan 'The Solemn League and Covenant', in Roger A. Mason (ed.), *Scotland and England, 1286-1815* (Edinburgh, 1987), 182-202; Edward J. Cowan, 'The Covenanting Tradition in Scottish History', in E.J. Cowan and R.J. Finlay (eds), *Scottish History: The Power of the Past* (Edinburgh, 2002), 121-45.

⁵ Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c.1650-c.1750* (Oxford, 1997), 21-37.

⁶ Cowan, 'Covenanting Tradition', 125-9, 142-3.

⁷ Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton, 2001), 161, quoting Alexander Montgomerie, 'The Flying of Montgomerie and Polwart', in George Stevenson (ed.), *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie, supplementary volume* (Edinburgh, 1910), 129-89. Although Montgomerie was almost certainly from Ayrshire, there is a Galloway tradition from the late 17th century that he was born at Cumstoun (or Compston) near Kirkcudbright. Julia Muir Watt, *Dumfries and Galloway: A Literary Guide* (Dumfries, 2000), 258-9.

⁸ See Hannah Aitken, *A Forgotten Heritage: Original Folk Tales of Lowland Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1973), 45-6, 49-50.

the Carlin's Cairn, perched on top of the Rhinns of Kells: 'Some say it was thrown together to commemorate the burning of a witch—others, that it was erected on the spot where an old female Covenanter was murdered by Grierson of Lag'. Barbour himself preferred a third theory, that it was in fact collected by the wife of a miller in Polmaddie to commemorate the memory of King Robert Bruce, 'yet' he implores us,

let it be recollected that neither cairn nor column rises to the memory of the saviour of his country, save one little rustic cairn on the summit of the Kells Rhynns, and that little cairn, not the work of a nation, but the laborious stone-gathering of a peasant and a woman.⁹

Much of the historical material has been found in kirk session and presbytery records; ministers and elders were particularly obsessed with fornication, adultery, swearing, drunkenness and with punishing those who had been caught working or enjoying themselves on the Lord's Day. The point is that witchcraft was not always at the top of their list of priorities, but, it was far from absent. It will be argued that the south west of Scotland did take the practice of witchcraft, of charming, and of wrongfully accusing someone of being a witch, very seriously indeed and perhaps for longer than other parts of Scotland. However, it would be unwise to think that this was an obsessional interest, that witches were being hunted down and scourged on a daily basis. Witch belief operated on a more subtle and complex level—there were peaks and troughs and the outcome of an accusation was often very dependent upon the belief of the minister involved. It was he who decided whether or not to recommend the instigation of judicial proceedings, to punish the accused himself—which in the period under study was the most common outcome—or to throw the case out altogether, either through lack of evidence or simple disbelief.

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The number of relatively late cases of witch belief in the South West is quite significant. In comparison with some parts of Scotland—for example in the North East or the Lothians where witch-hunting was well under way by the latter part of the sixteenth century—persecution in Dumfries and Galloway did not begin in earnest until the mid-seventeenth century. There was a noise of witchcraft in Galloway in 1614-5 according to the *Records of the Privy Council*, which issued commissions for the investigation of 'sundry persons',¹⁰ followed by an apparent lull until a reported case in Drorgan, Wigtownshire in 1622¹¹ and a more

⁹ John Gordon Barbour, *Unique Traditions chiefly of the West and South of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1886), 31, 39.

¹⁰ *Records of the Privy Council* [RPC], x, 231, Commission to William, Bishop of Galloway, 6 April 1614, and x, 327, Commission to the Steward of Kirkcudbright, 3 May 1615.

¹¹ *RPC*, xii, 720, Commission to John, Earl of Wigtown, 15 May 1622.

serious outbreak in Dumfries in the years 1628-31.¹² Thereafter, cases remained fairly spotty throughout the area.¹³

Christina Larner estimated that Scotland experienced, in total, just over 3000 cases of witchcraft and around 1500 executions. The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft has recently updated the total to 3837 formal accusations though the information is still sketchy on actual executions.¹⁴ At least 128, and possibly more, of these cases took place in the Dumfries and Galloway region; seventy-eight in the county of Dumfries, thirty-five in Kirkcudbright, and fifteen in Wigtown.¹⁵ It is hard to gauge, with any precision, what proportion of the population was affected by accusations of witchcraft as census data was not gathered until 1755. Based on Alexander Webster's unofficial census of that date, it is possible to estimate, per head of population, roughly how many individuals faced a formal accusation.¹⁶

Region	Population	Witchcraft Cases	Per Head of pop.
Dumfries	39,788	78	1 in 510
Kirkcudbright	21,205	35	1 in 605
Wigtown	16,466	15	1 in 1097
Total	77,459	128	1 in 605

Since the national average for persons accused of witchcraft was approximately 1 in 330,¹⁷ the South West, and Wigtown in particular, was not an especially dangerous place to live with regard to the witch-hunts.

One frustrating problem is that the records are at times incomplete, missing or lost, or just too vague as to what really happened and to whom, for names are not always provided. Fortunately, not all cases have such scanty evidence. Two women, Jonet McMuldritche and Elspeth Thomson, who were not so far as is known related, were brought to trial,

¹² *RPC*, 2nd ser., ii, 328-9, Commission to sheriff of Dumfries, 5 June 1628; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 340, 345, Commission to sheriff of Dumfries, 6 and 12 Nov. 1629; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 446, 450-1, 550-1, Various commissions, 4 and 9 Feb., 1 June 1630; *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 550-1, Commission to Sir Robert Greir of Lag, 1 June 1631.

¹³ For further references, see G. F. Black, *A Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510-1727* (New York, 1938); Christina Larner, C. H. Lee and H. V. McLachlan, *A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (Glasgow, 1977).

¹⁴ Of that total number 2769 occurred before, and including, 1662. After that significant turning point, 429 (or 13% of the national total) cases have been recorded. Figures are from *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft Database [SSWD]* at www.arts.ed.ac.uk/witches/

¹⁵ Dumfries and Galloway figures are from *SSWD*.

¹⁶ James Gray (ed.), *Scottish Population Statistics including Webster's Analysis of Population 1755* (Edinburgh, 1952), 82.

¹⁷ Based on Webster's calculation that there were 1,265,380 persons in Scotland in 1755.

found guilty, and executed in Dumfries in 1671.¹⁸ Jonet McMuldritche was charged with using witchcraft to kill cattle and horses, but more seriously, to murder two men with whom she had a falling out. Her first victim, Robert Brown, had driven McMuldritche's cattle off his pasture-land. She confronted him about it but, in the ensuing argument, lost her temper and cursed him. Robert Cairns, her second target, had accused McMuldritche of stealing corn and hay from his barn and of cursing him with an illness. When Cairns implored her to visit him and remove the curse she refused. Both men died, allegedly as a direct result of her imprecations.

Elspeth Thomson of Rerrick was charged with cursing John Corsbie and his wife Rosina McGhie (her sister-in-law) because the couple had not invited her to the baptism of their child. Donald McGhie, Thomson's brother-in-law, spread rumours that she had used witchcraft to make the Corsbies sick. In response to his allegations Thomson's husband, William McGhie, confronted his brother Donald with a warning that things would not go well for him for calling his wife, who was also Donald's sister-in-law, a witch. Donald McGhie died shortly afterwards. To make matters worse, eyewitnesses swore that when Thomson came to pay her last respects she touched the body; immediately blood 'rushed forth from his nose, navell and ears and his corpse bleed all the way to the Buriall place'. A bleeding corpse had long been regarded as proof of guilt in murder enquiries. James VI commented,

in a secret murther, if the deade carcasse be at any time thereafter handled by the murtherer, it wil gush out of bloud, as if the blud wer crying to the heaven for revenge of the murtherer, God having appoynted that secret super-naturall signe. . .¹⁹

The case of Jonet Rendall, accused of witchcraft and 'devilrie' in Orkney in 1629, affords another example of the bleeding corpse. According to her dittay when she was brought into the presence of her victim, 'the cors having lyein ane guid space and not having bled any, immediatelic bled mutch bluid as ane suir token' that she was the author of his death.²⁰ A man was executed in Kirkcaldy in 1662 for the murder of his father, the proof of his guilt determined by the blood which fell from the victim's nose when he touched it.²¹ In 1698 Mr. William Fraser, a minister

¹⁸ Trial of Elspeth Thomson and Jonet McMuldroche or McMuldritche, 16 May 1671, is discussed in chapter 10 of Larner's *Enemies of God*. See also A. Truckell, *Material on Witchcraft and Magical Practices in Dumfries and Galloway No. 43*, 7-8, and William McDowall, *History of Dumfries* (Edinburgh, 1867), 432. Both women were executed on 18 May 'betwixt tuo and foure houres in the afernoone to the ordinare place of execution for the toune of drumfreis And their to be wirried at ane stake till they be dead And theirafter their bodies to be brunt to ashes And all their moveable goods and geir to be excheat. . .'.

¹⁹ James VI, *Daemonologie in forme of a Dialogue*. 1597 (London, 1924), 80.

²⁰ Trial of Jonet Rendall, Orkney, 1629, qtd. in G. F. Black, *County Folklore vol. III: Orkney and Shetland Islands* (1903; Felinfach and London, 1994), 104.

²¹ George R. Kinloch (ed.), *The Diary of Mr. John Lamont of Newton, 1649-1671* (Edinburgh, 1830), 150-1, Simpkins, *County Folk-Lore Fife*, 117-18.

and step-son of the deceased Jean Gordon of Slaines, Aberdeenshire, was made, with others, to touch her corpse as a result of which 'there appeared nothing upon the body to make the least indication of her having been murdered'. The traditional ordeal of blood, although found wanting, was obviously still considered worthwhile.²²

The case of Jonet McMuldritche was largely concerned with agricultural disputes, straying farm animals and theft. That of Elspeth Thomson was somewhat different. Though she shared with McMuldritche the reputation of possessing an ability to curse, with deadly results, her notoriety as a witch seems to have been formed, at least in part, by her husband's relations who, for some reason, disliked or disapproved of her. More than half of the depositions given against her came from the McGhie brothers and their spouses. Her husband, William, did not actually testify against her, though incriminating stories that he had told to his family were mentioned by them.²³ Thomson was blamed for the death of one family member (Donald McGhie), while another (James McGhie) also claimed he had been a victim of her spells after he had refused to give her work. An intriguing feature of both cases is that men are the primary accusers. It has been argued elsewhere that typically such quarrels were between women.²⁴

Also in 1671, the Steward Depute of Kirkcudbright ordered the magistrates of Dumfries to hand over suspected witches Bessie Paine, Janet Hewat, Grissall McNae (or Rae), Margaret McGuffok and Margaret Fleming at sunrise, at the west end of the bridge of Dumfries for transportation to Kirkcudbright. They were to be tied with 'small cords'.²⁵ Very little information has survived about these unfortunate women, with the exception of Bessie Paine, who was charged with a series of offences which included charming oxen and cattle, and attempting to cure sick children and adults. While some of her patients recovered, others were not so lucky and may well have been the reason she found herself in trouble, both with her neighbours and the law. From the available evidence it seems that her assistance was frequently sought. She cured an ox belonging to John Turner, Elder in Ardwall by feeding it with hay, bere and green kail stocks. She then waited until the ox licked its upper lip; failure to lick would have been a sign that the animal would die. Paine was also called upon to cure Robert Hutton's cow, which she

²² *RPC*, October 1698, quoted in Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, iii, 208-9. See also Dalyell, *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, 36-43, and McPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland*, 274-5.

²³ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 125.

²⁴ For example, see James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550-1750*, (London, 1997) 169-89 and James Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth-Century England: Some Northern Evidence', *Continuity and Change* 6 (1991) 179-99.

²⁵ Held at Dumfries Tolbooth, Janet Hewat, Bessie Paine, Margaret Fleming, Grissall McNae and Margaret McGuffok, 6 June 1671, Letter from Glendonyng, Truckell, No. 43, 8, and Dumfries and Galloway Archive Centre website extract. A total of eight women had appeared at an Assize in Dumfries of which five were sent to Kirkcudbright for trial. Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 72.

did by leading the beast through a hank of green yarn and uttering some words, none of which were comprehensible to the onlookers. At least one of her remedies involved transference, as in the case of Richard Crockett's cow which she cured, but with a warning that the first thing the cow should see, on recovering, would die. As foretold, the cow confronted one of William Wright's oxen which expired immediately.

The treatment of livestock was not her only speciality, however. When the wife of Cuthbert Browne of Craigend became ill he sent for Paine who determined 'that Agnes Rowan²⁶ had witched her'. Paine successfully cured the wife, hinting that the best way to combat the magic of a 'black' witch was to deploy the skills of a 'white' witch. Walter Paterson in Tarranauchtie sought Paine's help to cure his sick child after he had 'used all ordinarie means' which had proved ineffectual; the child recovered. Another father, John Crockett in Lands, asked for help with his sick child, but after Paine described the ritual that would effect a cure the mother of the infant was too frightened to go through with it, and so the child lay sick for two more years. Sometimes Paine's powers were to no avail. Agnes Davidson deponed that when her father became sick, Paine requested some hair from his head and beard, and a sample of his nail clippings. She also commandeered his garters which she wound round her arm three times from her finger to her elbow, but to no avail for, within a week, the father had died.

According to some who knew her, Paine also had a less benign side. Herbert Crockett complained that she had been responsible for the deaths of all seven of his cattle. During a lykewake, Crockett (obscurely) had cut a piece out of the cloak of Paine's husband, John Murray. Next day an enraged Paine threatened that 'befoir it were long he should have ane other thing to think upon'. A month later the cows were dead and Paine was the obvious suspect. A further quarrel between Bessie Paine and John Crockett's wife involved the loss of cattle, though it may be suspected that Crockett was not the most efficient manager of livestock since, allegedly as a result of this altercation, for eleven years thereafter 'he had no kyne [cows] at all that lives'. The malevolent side of her powers was also experienced by Robert Sturgeon who had taken a croft at Aird, formerly inhabited by Paine. Not long after he moved in, she paid him a visit and, while sitting on the hearth stone, stated, 'all the witchcraft which I have I leave it here'. It was common knowledge that within a year Sturgeon lost over thirty cattle and 'nothing he tooke in hand did prosper dureing his possession of that rowme [rental]'.²⁷

Paine's clients were both male and female. This was not particularly unusual, with the exception, perhaps, of the two fathers, Paterson and

²⁶ There is no further information on Agnes Rowan as it would appear she was never formally accused of, or tried for, witchcraft. She is not named in Black's *Calendar* nor does the Larner *et. al. Source-Book* assign her a case number, though she is mentioned in the transcripts section.

²⁷ Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland [NAS], JC26/38, Trial of Bessie Paine, Kirkcudbright, 1671. Transcript also in Larner *et. al., Source-Book*, 269-70.

John Crockett, who took the initiative in the cure of sick children, a role that might be assumed to be traditionally female. It is possible that Paine regarded herself as a professional ‘white witch’ or charmer. That she could un-witch a client hints at the possibility that she did not regard her special powers as evil, though some of her neighbours clearly thought otherwise. Regrettably, as none of the depositions indicate whether Paine was paid or rewarded in any way for her services, the suggestion must remain speculative.

Evidence that witches were often treated inhumanely during their internment is evidenced in this episode. All five suspects were imprisoned within a ‘dark dungeon’ of Kirkcudbright Tolbooth, in which they were kept in ‘a most miserable conditione being alwayes at the point of starving having nothing of their own nor nothing allowed them for their sustenance’. In the winter of 1671 Bessie Paine died ‘through cold hunger [and] other inconveniences of the prison’. Hewat, Rae, and McGuffok were released in the summer of 1672, on the grounds that they were ‘maliciously misrepresented as guiltie of the most horrid crymes’, pending further notice. No mention is made of Margaret Fleming who presumably was released.²⁸

Elsbeth McEwen, of Balmaclellan in Galloway, imprisoned for witchcraft from 1696 to 1698, was said to be a person of ‘superior education’. Allegedly, she could bewitch hens into laying an enormous number of eggs, or conversely, could stop them laying altogether. She also used a wooden pin to steal milk from her neighbours’ cows; the pin had only to touch the cow’s udder for the process to take place. Tradition relates that the minister was sent to bring McEwen before the session, and that in the process his mare became very frightened, sweating blood on the hill near the manse, since remembered as the ‘Bluidy Brae’.²⁹ Whatever the truth of the tale, the ‘old wife of Bogha’ was sent to Kirkcudbright Tolbooth where she remained for about two years. Conditions were exceedingly harsh within prison, so it is of some credit to McEwen’s strength of spirit, though eventually the pain and hardships she endured led her to a confession. She was executed on 24 August 1698. The executioner, William Kirk, was treated somewhat better for he received money, food, a new outfit, and, ‘when she was burning’, a pint of ale.

At least one person stood up for McEwen: Janet Corbie was denounced for ‘endeavouring to dissuade her to confess’, vigorously asserting that people ‘sinned ther sowl’ who said she was a witch. Unfortunately, Corbie proved a most unsuitable ally as she was a very unpopular character who abused the Lord’s Day and assailed her neighbours

²⁸ NAS, JC2/13, Trial of Bessie Paine, Margaret McGuffock, Grissell Rae and Janet Howat, Kirkcudbright, 1671-2; *Records of Proceedings of Justiciary Court, Edinburgh, 1661-78*, ii, 104; Larner, *et. al.*, *Source-Book*, 269-74.

²⁹ Maxwell states, ‘one of the most convincing parts of the evidence against the accused was, that the minister’s horse, which was sent to bring her up for trial, trembled with fear when she mounted, and sweated drops of blood’. Maxwell, *History of Dumfries and Galloway*, 259. That Elspeth’s contact with the horse caused it to bleed is reminiscent of the ordeal by touch, used mainly to expose murderers.

from whom she stole goods, such as onions and cabbages, which she then sold for profit. Her presence could be tolerated no more and the magistrates and town council of Kirkcudbright ordered that she be banished from the burgh.³⁰

In 1701, witnesses came forward to complain about Janet M'Robert. Among her long list of crimes, she had caused a woman's breast to swell, so endangering her nursing baby. This M'Robert allegedly did because she was discontented with the quantity of chaff (hay or straw) she had received to feed her cow. On other occasions, she was blamed for contaminating a cow's milk, crippling a dog, driving another dog mad, and cheating a girl out of her money. People told of hearing strange, unearthly screams coming from her house, and of having seen phantom lights flickering within. Elizabeth Lauchlon claimed that she saw M'Robert's spinning wheel moving of its own accord, and when she tried to stop it, she was thrown back against the wall. Later on, in M'Robert's house,

the Devil appeared to her [Lauchlon] in the likeness of a man, and did bid her deliver herself over to him, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, which she refused to do, saying she would rather give herself to God Almighty.

After Satan disappeared, M'Robert swore Lauchlon to secrecy; when he appeared again she resisted his entreaties to accompany him. Though the evidence against M'Robert was weighty, and included allegations of Devil worship, a commission to try her was denied by the Privy Council. Not content with the verdict, the Kirkcudbright session banished M'Robert to Ireland instead.³¹

Jean M'Murray of Twynholm requested banishment in 1703, having survived multiple accusations over a period of ten years. As was the case with most suspected witches, she mostly took revenge on people who were unkind to her: she inflicted a woman with a stitch-like pain which lasted until death; she spoilt milk, and killed at least three horses. Only a few years earlier, any one of these accusations might have led to M'Murray's execution.³²

It is clear, in a letter dated 1704 from the Commissioners of the General Assembly to the presbytery of Wigtown, that the ministers, at

³⁰ Trial of Elspeth MacEwen, 24 August 1698, in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 72-82, C. H. Dick, *Highways and Byways in Galloway and Carrick* (London, 1938), 480-1; MacKenzie, *History of Galloway*, ii, 37, Anon., *History of Galloway*, 2 vols (Kirkcudbright, 1841), ii, 342-3, appendix 37-40; Trial of Janet Corbie, 31 July 1697, Kirkcudbright Burgh Records.

³¹ Trial of Janet M'Robert of Milnburn, 6 and 12 Feb., 10 April 1701, Kirk Session of Kirkcudbright, quoted in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 82-7, and Anon., *History of Galloway*, ii, appendix 40-2. See also Edward J. Cowan and Lizanne Henderson, 'The last of the witches? The survival of Scottish witch belief', in Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*, 198-217.

³² Trial of Jean M'Murray of Irelandton, Twynholm, 18 and 25 April, 2 and 9 May 1703, Kirk Session of Twynholm, quoted in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 87-91, and Anon., *History of Galloway*, ii, appendix 42-4.

least in the South West and presumably throughout Scotland, felt themselves to be under threat. The letter articulated fears of the 'distressed state of diverse of the reformed churches' and the urgent need for the ministers to address in their sermons

the pernicious heresies, idolatries and superstitions of the Romish Church, and warn them [the congregations] with wisdom and prudence of the great and imminent dangers we are in of being overrun therewith. . .³³

In this climate of presbyterian moral panic, it is perhaps little wonder that a slight surge in the persecution of witches and charmers can be seen.³⁴ They had been, after all, for quite some time, the natural targets or scapegoats in times of social and spiritual crisis.

In this context it is no surprise to find the Wigtown presbytery genuinely frightened by a woman from Kirkinner, Jean Brown, who came before them in 1706 claiming that she conversed with spirits which cured her when she was ill. The spirits, which she could not see but could feel, would 'ly carnally with her as men and women do when they beget children'. They had killed a man on her behalf because she had had a quarrel with his wife. They told her 'that they who took the test³⁵ would go to hell', but even worse, she claimed that these spirits were her maker, and that she prayed to them, particularly the spirit with whom she had sex for he was 'the Father Son and Holy Ghost'; 'they are God and she knows they are God because none but God can lift persons from sicknesse to health'. Further blasphemy was implicit in her revelation that according to the spirits, 'this world is to be destroyed'. Brown would not, under any circumstances, ask for repentance nor would she accept that the spirits were evil and of Satan. After much praying Jean Brown was detained in prison, a woman, who was described as 'under powerfull and satanicall delusions'.³⁶ The excessive praying which took place

³³ NAS, CH2/373/1, 6 Sept. 1704, Letter from the Commission dated 8 Aug. 1704, *Register of the Presbytery of Wigtown*.

³⁴ Occasionally, with regard to witchcraft, the brethren banded together in times of perceived crisis, offering spiritual support to their congregations and one another. The ministers at Irvine, for instance, appointed 5 May 1697 'to be kept for humiliation and fasting through the bounds of this presbytrie' in a show of support for those at Paisley investigating the Christian Shaw case (NAS, CH2/197, Irvine Presbytery Records, 27 April 1697). The following year, Irvine presbytery were involved in nominating one of their number to attend a meeting of parliament in Edinburgh 'for joyning with other Ministers sent from other presbyteries in prosecution of the recommendation of the Generall Assembly and Commission, against poperie, prophanity, schism, and to crave a new and plainer law against adultery, witchcraft, . . .'. Rev. Patrick Warner was appointed to attend (NAS, CH2/197, Irvine Presbytery Records, 19 July 1698).

³⁵ The Test Act was implemented on 31 August, 1681. Though it was criticised on the grounds of inconsistency, most seriously its association with the Duke of York's right to the succession, a great many ministers were deprived for refusal to 'take the Test'. *Act of the Parliaments of Scotland*, viii, 243, c.6. See also W. C. Dickinson and G. Donaldson (eds), *A Source Book of Scottish History*, 3 vols (1954; London, 1961), iii, 185-9.

³⁶ Jean Brown, formerly from Kirkinner parish, presently a servant in Skaith, parish of Penninghame, first appeared before the Penninghame Session on 20 Jan. 1706. Given the seriousness of the case, the Session agreed to take it to the sheriff depute of

before and during Brown's presence is not usually mentioned in cases involving witches. Fear of Brown's close Satanic involvement evoked extra measures of protection; she may have been considered, at least in these ministers' experience, to be even worse than a witch. The prayers may have possibly functioned as a form of exorcism. There was some evidence of exorcism at Rerrick.³⁷ However, the most likely explanation was that the prayers were used against Brown, by the ministers, in self-defence.

In Dumfriesshire, Sarah Smith, from Lochrutton was questioned in 1692 but the case was eventually dropped a year later because the depositions, and all the relevant paperwork, were lost.³⁸ In 1699, Elspeth Goldie or Gaudie was released from prison and made to stand at the church door and was 'rebuked on the pillar', for using offensive, scandalous and revengeful language against her brother-in-law, as well as for consulting with a known witch, Janet Kennedy. Apparently, she asked Kennedy to 'witch' her brother-in-law's new wife to death.³⁹ One of the key aspects of the Witchcraft Act of 1563 was that it regarded consultation with witches as just as culpable as actually practising witchcraft, but this seems never to have been enforced though it was nevertheless an ecclesiastical offence.

The role played by the ministers in witchcraft cases was considerable and often determined whether or not allegations would be followed up, or formal charges pressed. Only a few examples, from a potentially rich stock of available material, can be discussed here. The area around Caerlaverock, at the turn of the century, seems to have been a hotbed of witches. In 1692 three women, from Blackshaw, Locharwoods and Mousewald, were sent to Edinburgh to be tried for their 'many grievous malefices committed upon their neighbours and others'.⁴⁰ The outcome is unknown, though it is known that a local minister, Robert Paton, was one of the investigators and that he was further involved in enquiries

³⁶ (Continued) Wigtown, who in turn referred the case to the presbytery. Henry Paton (ed.), *Penninghame Parish Records. The Session Book of Penninghame 1696-1724*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1933) i. 164-6. She appeared before presbytery on 29, 30 Jan., 1706, NAS, CH2/373/1, Register of the Presbytery of Wigtown. There is a comparable case at Dumfries in 1691 concerning Janet Fraser who had Satanic visions. See Wood, *Witchcraft in the South-West*, 124-31.

³⁷ On events at Rerrick see Alexander Telfair, *A True Relation of an Apparition, Expressions and Actings of a Spirit which infested the House of Andrew Mackie in Ring-Croft of Stocking, in the Parish of Rerrick, in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, in Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 1696).

³⁸ Dumfries, Dumfries and Galloway Archive Centre [DGA], CH2/1284/2, Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1687-1695, Sarah Smith in Lochrutton, 31 May, 20 July 1692, 27 June, 11 July 1693.

³⁹ DGA, CH2/537/15/1, St. Michael's Kirk Session Dumfries, Elspeth Goldie and Janet Kennedy, 23 Feb. to 7 Sept. 1699. I would like to thank Mr. Ian Anderson for bringing this case to my attention and for kindly providing a transcript.

⁴⁰ DGA, CH2/1284/2, *Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1687-1695*, Marion Dickson in Blackshaw, Isobel Dickson in Locharwoods, her daughter Marion Herbertson in Mousewaldbank, 6 Jan., 23 Feb., 15 March, 1692. See also Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, iii, 66, McDowall, *History of Dumfriesshire*, 378, and Truckell, No. 43, 8. There was possibly a fourth witch.

against other suspected witches including another Caerlaverock woman, Janet Wharrie.⁴¹ The proceedings against Wharrie were actually instigated by herself when she approached the kirk session claiming she had been slandered as a witch. Witnesses were gathered and Wharrie appeared before the presbytery in 1697 on various allegations, such as causing a neighbour's cow to vomit grass. She had been seen down on her knees praying for the cow to vomit and 'rowt' [bellow] till it died. The cow was then observed scraping a hole with its foot and spewing into it, a most unusual occurrence given that cows are unable to vomit!⁴² One man alleged that Wharrie had approached him one day while he was ploughing and asked him to go with her to see her sick mare, which was distempered. When he refused, she became very angry at which point his plough ceased to work and the horses started to leap around, breaking their reins. Another man claimed something similar after he refused to plough some ground for her. She was also blamed for causing illness and had been heard uttering, against the wife of one of her enemies, an imprecation that she should have 'many a bloody day & night', which seemed to happen approximately five weeks later when the poor woman spat blood and vomited the same 'in platefulls'. Witnesses to Wharrie's mischief were not hard to find and some claimed to have heard her begging that a man, whom she thought had come to wrong her, might be afflicted with the 'Glengare' [Glengore or syphilis], which immediately came to pass. While it is highly unusual for witches to be credited with the onset of venereal disease, the witnesses presumably could think of no other way this man could have contracted it. Wharrie denied all the charges.

The outcome of this episode is rather interesting for what did not happen, rather than for what did. The moderator was appointed to consult with a lawyer in Edinburgh. However, he was unable to get advice from 'any able lawyer' because of, as he states, 'their multiplicity of business at this juncture'.⁴³ It would appear there was a great reluctance, within Edinburgh legal circles, to become involved any longer in regional witch disputes. Since there was such uncertainty about how to proceed, the case was delayed until more advice could be sought. The latter commodity was obviously hard to come by, for Janet Wharrie's case was not discussed again until two years later, alongside those of some

⁴¹ Robert Paton, minister of Dumfries 1696-1715, was involved in cases of 1692, 1699, 1700, 1705, and 1709. *SSWD*

⁴² A cow has four digestive compartments of which one, the rumen, stores grass and allows the cud to be regurgitated and rechewed to aid digestion. Cows with toothache have been observed dropping some cud from their mouth which might look like vomiting. The leaves of the rhododendron are poisonous to cattle and would cause an overproduction of saliva which might look like the cow was vomiting. However, rhododendron was not yet introduced to Scotland and so it remains unclear what actually happened to this particular cow. Thank you to Mrs. Alison Burgess (Maryfield Farm, New Abbey) for pointing this out to me and to Mr. Hugh Dickson (Bard Veterinary Group, Dumfries) for his thoughts on the matter.

⁴³ DGA, CH2/1284/3, Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695-1701, Case of Janet Wharrie, Caerlaverock, 21 Sept., 5, 11 and 15 Oct., and 7 Dec. 1697.

other witches who posed similar problems: 'Nothing yet being done with these women in prison suspected of witchcraft, nor with Janet Wharry in Caerlaverock'. The Lord Advocate was informed of the situation and four months later, in 1700, he reported to the brethren that nothing could be done 'effectually' because he judged the things alleged against these women were 'not so momentous as to require a commission to put them to tryall'. The jailer was paid and, presumably, though it is not actually stated, the women were released.⁴⁴ The evidence in this instance clearly suggests that while the local ministers—Robert Paton, Robert Blair, Alexander Veitch and John Somerville—were keen to act, the central authorities felt no such compunction.⁴⁵ The fact that Wharrie, (possibly together with the other women mentioned) was held for at least two years is indicative of the tenacity of local prejudice and assumption.

In 1705 it was once again brought to the attention of the Dumfries presbytery that 'several persons' in the parish of Caerlaverock were suspected of witchcraft. Robert Paton, Robert Blair and John Somerville, among others, were involved. The ministers appointed to meet at Caerlaverock on 27 March, at which time 'they prayed with the familie molested' and 'discouraged', that is, expressed disapproval of 'all the persons suspected to be the instruments of the disturbance'. As the nine ministers appointed as investigators could not establish any proof that witchcraft had been involved the matter was referred to the King's advocate for his advice and opinion. His response was fairly quick, abruptly telling them that 'no criminal process can be raised against the persons suspected of witchcraft upon anything yet represented'. The presbytery then thought it fitting to let the issue rest and 'leave the matter to providence'.⁴⁶ No longer was an unsupported accusation sufficient for condemnation. The handling of this case suggests that the ministers were sympathetic to the opinions of their parishioners, in particular those who were demanding that action be taken against the alleged witches.⁴⁷ However, stricter demands regarding 'proof of guilt' were by now well established. Although central government had taken a back seat in the prosecution of witches in general, the local ministers still had to deal

⁴⁴ DGA, CH2/1284/3, Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695-1701, 7 Nov. 1699, 5 March 1700.

⁴⁵ Aside from Robert Paton, Janet Wharrie and the 3 unnamed witches were investigated by Robert Blair, minister in Holywood 1698-1724, John Somerville, minister at Caerlaverock 1697-1734, and Alexander Veitch, minister at St. Michael's Dumfries 1694-1715. Veitch was involved in the Pentland Rising and was imprisoned on the Bass Rock 1679-1680. *SSWD*

⁴⁶ DGA, CH2/1284/4, Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1701-1710, 27 Feb., 27 March, 24 April, 26 June 1705. The entry for 27 March reads 'all the persons suspected . . . except Bessie Heslope, whom they could not find'. She is the only named accused.

⁴⁷ The nine ministers were Robert Blair, Holywood 1698-1724; James Guthrie, Kirkpatrick-Irongray 1694-1759; John Hutchison (no details); John MacMurdo, Torthorwald 1702-1720; John Nisbet, New Abbey 1697-1722; Robert Paton, Dumfries 1696-1715; John Reid, Lochrutton 1690-92; John Somerville, Caerlaverock 1697-1734; and David Wightman, Terregles 1702-1706. *SSWD*

with community frictions and therefore found it necessary to ‘discourage’ the suspects in order to pacify all involved.

In 1709 the minister at Kirkbean, (situated in Kirkcudbrightshire, but in the presbytery and synod of Dumfries), Mr Andrew Reid, gave his deposition against a witch by the name of Janet Harestanes. Among her crimes were causing the minister’s newly-built house to come tumbling down ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, and only a day later, though he had escaped unscathed from the house, he nearly drowned on his way to Edinburgh. To add to his suspicions, she was unable to repeat the Lord’s Prayer without making mistakes in every line. Other people claimed that she had made them sick after quarrelling with her. It was recommended by the investigators, which included Robert Paton and Robert Blair, that she be banished from the bounds. That Janet was a menace to society was clearly felt by many who knew her, for this was not the first time she had been in trouble, nor, indeed, was it the first time she suffered banishment. She first appeared before the presbytery of Dumfries in 1699 on charges of witchcraft and charming. On 2 April, 1700 the ministers decided to banish her; on 23 April, of the same year, however, she was back!⁴⁸ In 1704 she was causing trouble for the session at Glencairn (just north of Dumfries) which ordered a public announcement that ‘no heritor, tenant, or householder whatsoever within this parish resett or harbour Jaunet Harestanes’ for she is ‘reputed to be under the *mala-fama* of witchcraft’.⁴⁹ She was obviously quite a character and certainly very tenacious, but what is significant is that the clergy exhibited some tolerance in dealing with her cases, whereas a few decades earlier she would almost certainly have suffered capital punishment.

Ministers, or their families, were occasionally the target of Auld Nick’s attentions. The daughter of the Rev. William Boyd, minister of Dalry from 1690, was visited by the Devil in the form of a bumble bee, and on another occasion in the form of an attractive young man who seduced her into playing cards on a Sunday and then carried her off on his black horse. Luckily for her, or perhaps she thought unluckily, her father saw them and shouted on her to come back for Christ’s sake, and the young man (the Devil) put her down from his horse.⁵⁰

In the parish of Kirkmaiden, Rev. Archibald Marshall, ordained in 1697, was famous for having ‘laid the ghost of Galdenoch’, a castle north west of Stranraer.⁵¹ He also had a reputation for being a zealous

⁴⁸ DGA, CH2/1284/3, Records of the Presbytery of Dumfries 1695-1701, trial of Janet Harestanes, 1699, 1700. Deposition of Andrew Reid, minister at Kirkbean, 1709, transcript by Mr. Truckell. Robert Paton and the minister at Holywood, Robert Blair, who were involved in the investigations at Caerlaverock, were further involved in the Harestanes case, 3 May 1709. SSWD

⁴⁹ Janet Hairstanes, 10, 24 Sept. 1704, Glencairn Kirk Session Records, quoted in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 132-3.

⁵⁰ *East Galloway Sketches (Dalry)* 349, quoted in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 34-5; R. deB. Trotter, *Galloway Gossip or the Southern Albanich 80 years ago* (Dumfries, 1901).

⁵¹ Andrew Agnew, *A History of the Hereditary Sheriffs of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 1864), ii, 164-66.

persecutor of witches, in which endeavour he not only employed a witchfinder, even at this very late date, but one who was, furthermore, a female. There is a story that the Kirkmaiden witches got their revenge, however, for one day when he was out walking, a hare crossed his path and from that moment on, he was unable to open his mouth in the Kirkmaiden pulpit and had to be transferred to Kirkcolm in 1700.⁵² He obviously experienced a complete cure for it was reported 'his voice was so powerful, that on a calm day he could be heard distinctly across Lochryan at the Cairn'.⁵³

Of particular interest in this case was Marshall's reliance upon a woman from Wigtown in his detection of witches. There is a report that she determined guilt simply by sight, as communicants filed through the church she allegedly pressed on Marshall's toes so that he could record the suspects' names. Detecting witches by sight had been a skill of Margaret Atkin, 'the great witch of Balwearie', who had herself been accused of witchcraft in 1597. She claimed that 'they had a secret mark, all of that sort, in their eyes, whereby she could surely tell, how soon she looked upon any, whether they were witches or not'. For three or four months, Atkin was taken from place to place to assist in the discovery of witches until, at last, she was found to be a fraud.⁵⁴

The Rev. Peter Rae of Kirkbride, a man of many talents and a former law student at the University of Glasgow, was better known as the author of *The History of the Rebellion Rais'd against His Majesty King George I* (1718),⁵⁵ and for his mechanical skills—he was one of the earliest printers in Dumfriesshire; he made his own press in the manse at Kirkbride and developed his own type. An astronomical chime clock which he constructed can still be seen at Drumlanrig Castle. He was also a firm believer in the existence of witches. He was rebuked in 1706 for calling a woman a witch, for having demanded that she restore his health to him and for having attempted to break her spell by bleeding her on the forehead, thus scoring, or 'striking above the breath, or the brow'.⁵⁶ This particular form of spell-breaking was fairly common and other instances can be documented. For instance, at Glencairn in 1694 Margaret McKinch was approached by Robert Muir in Dunregon, who allegedly drew his knife and offered to 'blood her above ye b[reath]'. Margaret

⁵² Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 97, citing Andrew Donaldson, *Guide to Kirkmaiden*, 40.

⁵³ Stranraer Session Register; Agnew, *Hereditary Sherrifs*, ii, 166; *Fasti Ecclesiae*.

⁵⁴ J. Spottiswoode, *The History of the Church of Scotland*, 3 vols (1655; Edinburgh, 1851), iii, 66-7.

⁵⁵ Rev. Peter Rae (1671-1748) also published *Gospel-Ministers Christ's Ambassadors*, (Edinburgh, 1733), *A Letter to the Honourable the Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland*, (1740), *A Treatise of Lawful Oaths and Perjury*, (Edinburgh, 1749), and compiled 'A Natural and Genealogical History of the Shire of Drumfries' (unpublished MS). Rae's *The History of the Rebellion Rais'd against His Majesty King George I*, (Dumfries, 1718; 2nd. ed. London, 1746) was attacked in doggerel verse by Robert Ker in *A Glass wherein Nobles, Priests, and People may see the Lord's Controversies against Britain*, (1719). See *Fasti Ecclesiae*.

⁵⁶ Truckell, No. 43, 10.

submitted a written list to the session of those who had, as she said, slandered her as a witch.⁵⁷

The Rev. John Taylor was deposed by the General Assembly from his charge at Wamphray in 1718 for, among other things, his refusal to take the Abjuration Oath⁵⁸ and for his disgraceful conduct towards the presbytery of Lochmaben, accusing them of favouring a 'Jacobite design' for Scotland. For some time after arriving in Wamphray in 1697, he had preached vehemently against dissenters, denouncing them as 'emissaries of Satan'. It seems Taylor was also a believer in witches for, when a woman in his congregation, Bessie French, was summoned before the session on charges of witchcraft, around 1709, he immediately presumed her guilt rather than her innocence. The situation was made trickier, so far as the minister was concerned, because French's own brother, and a brother-in-law, were elders of the Kirk. However, French took matters into her own hands; she forthrightly denounced Taylor and her other accusers, refused to appear before the session, and instead took her case to the Lochmaben presbytery hoping to clear her name. The presbytery found in her favour, a decision which sent Taylor into a rage, and he railed against his brethren for their laxity 'with regard to the great sin of witchcraft'.⁵⁹

John Taylor was a curious and complex character. Throughout the twenty-one years of his ministry there persisted an ongoing dispute about the precise bounds of his glebe. One of his first actions as minister was to petition the presbytery for a perambulation of the boundaries, but at his deposition in 1718 rumours still circulated that he had illegally moved some of the boundary markers. In a bizarre episode following a disagreement with his own church, he formed a 'Presbytery of Protesters' consisting of himself and two elders. They held a conventicle on Wamphray Moor at which they denounced the Union, patronage and the Abjuration Oath. The substantial gathering apparently attracted a considerable amount of popular support and proceedings ended with a solemn renewing of the covenants. Taylor ignored a summons to appear before the Lochmaben presbytery. He subsequently had disagreements with the commissioners of supply in Moffat, who had demanded an accounting of the number of the poor in the parish. Taylor, suspecting a ploy to press men into the army, forbade his elders to attend. When five of them did so he attempted to discipline them for conduct 'worse than Judas' but they ignored him; one of the five was William French.

⁵⁷ Margaret McKinch, 9 April 1694, *Glencairn Kirk Session Record*, quoted in Wood, *Witchcraft in South-West Scotland*, 132. In the 1690s Edward Maxwell of Hills granted damages to Janet Henderson, accused of causing illness, who had been cut above the brow. Truckell, No. 43, 9.

⁵⁸ The Abjuration Oath (1710), meaning an abjuration from jacobitism and a declaration of loyalty to the protestant succession. The presbyterians had misgivings because of doubts about what type of protestantism was intended. The Oath is printed in Wodrow, *Correspondence*, i, 153-4.

⁵⁹ John Paterson, *Wamphray: Pages from the History and Traditions of a Famous Parish in Upper Annandale* (Lockerbie, 1906), 91-105.

Bessie French was initially implicated when two men, John Bell and David Johnstone from Hillhouse farm, informed the session on oath that she was a witch. Describing some of her 'malefices' and 'gross Satanic practices' they alleged that her mother before her, 'lay under the same scandal', asserting that it was due to her family connections and friends that the matter had not hitherto been drawn to the minister's attention. Although details are sketchy it would seem there was bad blood between the tenants of Hillhouse and those of nearby Wamphraygate (less than half a mile away) which latter included the family of French, Bessie and her brothers Matthew and David. Taylor should have been surprised at the accusation, for Bessie was a regular attender at church, but instead he blamed his elders for 'neglective duty in hiding from him this flagrant scandal and gross iniquity going on in the parish for so long'. He insisted that the accused appear before the session. Her brother urged her to obey the summons in order to clear her name. Matthew French was reported as frequently stating that if his sister 'were found guilty, he would be content to see her burnt'.⁶⁰ Taylor later published a *Vindication* which repeated 'these idle stories without probation' against Bessie French thus revealing 'a swatch of his unchristian and reproachful spirit'.

Contemporaries simply could not understand how the accused could be guilty since, for at least twelve years of Taylor's ministry, he 'did not scruple to admit her to partake of the Lord's Supper'. One opponent asked,

where was his zeal against sin, especially such a horrid guilt as witchcraft for such a long time, that he never endeavoured to convince her thereof, or bring her to trial till of late?

Taylor later protested that on one occasion, when he handed Bessie French the token which would admit her to communion, he said, 'if thou be a witch, thou may take it, but the curse of God will go along with it, or something to this purpose'. Was he, in so doing, asked his critic, 'separating the precious from the vile or keeping the children's bread from dogs?' How, he asked, could a minister place a communion cup in the hand of a suspected devil? When the case was investigated by the Lochmaben presbytery they not only dismissed it outright but advised the accused to seek redress from a civil judge. Taylor's response was to accuse the presbytery of favouring witches and witchcraft, which in his deluded fashion he somehow associated with support for Jacobitism. The minister accused another individual in Wamphraygate, James Fergusson, of being 'a scandalous profane man, and one under the scandal of witchcraft and charming, a notour picker and thief, yeah an Atheist'. Yet Taylor supplied Fergusson with poor relief.⁶¹ The anonymous respondent to Taylor's *Vindication*

⁶⁰ *Mr Taylor's Case Stated, or a Just Reply to a book, intituled, A Vindication of Mr John Taylor Minister of Wamphray* (Dumfries, 1718), 63.

⁶¹ Taylor's *Vindication* also makes reference to James Fergusson, a charmer. Neither Bessie French or James Fergusson are in Black's *Calendar* or Larner *et. al.*, *Source-Book*.

opined that the minister 'should wear a paper hat as a token of perpetual infamy, never to be believed afterward'. Other witnesses testified that Taylor accused those elders who opposed him in the matter of witchcraft of 'having the marks of Hypocracie in their foreheads and taking the Devil's part'; and he also asserted that Bessie French's kin were 'knit together against the gospel'.

Taylor's outrageous behaviour, his unsupported and ludicrous accusations against members of the Lochmaben presbytery and his failure to subscribe the Abjuration Oath led to his suspension in 1715 by the General Assembly. In a final bizarre episode he was supposed to read notice of his own suspension after Sunday service. Members of the presbytery turned up to witness his failure to do so. Coincidentally the litigious Taylor had sued the laird of Wamphray for non-payment of his stipend and had retained the services of 'a band of armed men in Nithsdale' to serve the necessary summonses. Incredibly the laird paid up: a packed congregation looked on as armed men guarded the door of the kirk and the members of the presbytery adjourned to a nearby hostelry to fortify themselves against that cold December sabbath. Taylor was finally deposed in 1718, retiring to Eskdalemuir. He promptly set to work on his *Vindication*, though curiously he failed to comment on two further articles of libel against him; firstly, that he had pocketed some of the poor's money for himself, and secondly, that he 'did habitually and constantly lye in bed in the same room where his sister Katharin Taylor her bed was'. A formal complaint was made to the presbytery regarding the charges but no libel was proven. He was, however, admonished by 'several brethren' to cease sleeping in the same room as his sister.⁶² He died in 1745 and tradition in Upper Annandale recounts that as his funeral procession advanced towards Kirkpatrick Juxta churchyard it met with part of the Jacobite army heading south. As a mark of respect the Highlanders formed a line and saluted the funeral bier, so greatly impressing the mourners. However, they emerged from the graveyard to discover that their horses had been looted by the pious Highlanders, a fitting conclusion to a remarkable career.⁶³

It could be said of John Taylor as of Mr. William Morrison of Cromarty that 'a good deal of his religion consisted in finding fault, and a good deal more in the vagaries of a wild imagination'. Morrison believed that the Bible itself was opposed to the Treaty of Union and the Abjuration Oath as well as the Act of Toleration (1712). He attributed 'the deadness and carnality of the Church at this present time' to the role played by many of its members in the recent Act of Union,

of sorrowful memory, whereby our country's power to act for herself, both as to religion and liberty, is hung under the belt of idolatrous England. Woe unto thee, Scotland, for thou has sold thy birth-right!

⁶² *Mr Taylor's Case Stated, or a Just Reply*, 79-80.

⁶³ R. E. Searcher (sic), 'Notes on Rev. John Taylor Minister in Wamphray 1697-1718', *The Moffat News* 4 Mar. 1948; R. E. Searcher (sic), 'Notes on Rev. John Taylor Minister in Wamphray, 1697-1718' *Dumfries and Galloway Review*, June 1948.

He went on to lambast Erastianism, the Oath of Abjuration and, reaching a pitch of apoplectic indignation, the Union of 1707. He likened members of Parliament to

the worms of the earth, that creep, peep, and cry, appearing out of their dark holes and dens in this time of Scotland's dark night . . . It is in the night time that evil spirits and wild beasts seize on folk, and cry in the streets to fleg and flichter them; and such as they find most feared and apprehensive they haunt most. And so, oh Scotland! is thy Church affeared and flichtered with the shriekings and worryings of an evil Parliament.⁶⁴

Some cases are quite difficult to classify. William Drew from Newton Stewart, for instance, was called before the session of Penninghame in 1707 for beating his wife. When questioned, he confessed that he did beat her but he was provoked because she hit him with her elbow and threatened to 'expose the report of his being blamed for a warlock, by her saying she should take the mask off his face'. At least one minister, Rev. Robert Rowan, investigated the story and discovered that Drew did indeed go under the name of a notorious warlock. As proof, Rowan invoked several ministers of the presbytery of Kirkcudbright who declared that Drew had often been seen in the house of a woman, Jonet McKeoner, recently burned for witchcraft in Kirkcudbright. The witch's grand-daughter confirmed this report, adding that she had seen Drew, the Devil and her grandmother in the latter's house. Drew admitted that he had often been in the witch's house but only because he bought hair from her daughter, 'as his occupation served him'—he was a wig-maker.

It transpired that Drew was an Irishman who had arrived in Galloway via Glasgow. Testimonials from Irish and Glaswegian clergymen were deemed insufficient support for his subsequent request to have his child baptised unless he first consulted the session, who displayed some christian charity by opining,

the assertion of one witch seemed not sufficient to debar a person from church privileges *especially in a matter so difficult to be cleared* [my italics]; upon which the minister baptised his child.⁶⁵

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There are various examples of particularly late cases of witch belief in the south-eastern regions. A Galloway minister commented, at the end

⁶⁴ Miller, *Scenes and Legends*, 149-50. Miller is quoting from a manuscript written between 1710-13 by William Morrison.

⁶⁵ William Drew in Newton Stewart, 7, 21 Sept., 19 Oct., 9 Nov., 1707, 5 Dec. 1708, *Penninghame Parish Records. The Session Book of Penninghame 1696-1724*, 2 vols. vol. 1. The Rev. Robert Rowan, minister at Penninghame, was ordained in 1696 and died in 1714, *Fastii Ecclesiae*. The church was, in theory, responsible for dealing with wife abuse though comparatively few cases appear in the session records. A case of a man selling his wife appeared in the kirk session records of Elgin in 1698. Both the husband and the man who bought the wife were punished with a public rebuking and referred to the town magistrate. Cramond, *The Records of Elgin*, vol. 2, 320-1.

of the eighteenth century, that although witch belief was not entirely laid aside 'the kirk session no longer indulges a spirit of inquisitorial investigation on a train of idle and vexatious processes'.⁶⁶ Hindsight would prove him partly right, for although the church had more or less lost interest in persecuting witches and charmers, many of their parishioners had not. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were still people living in Wamphray who had seen the Devil, or the fairies 'dancing round them, a' the colours of the rainbow'. There were housewives who had watched the cream, when the butter was coming too slow, poured out of the kirm and into a pot with pins thrown into it to

prick the conscience of the witch. Woe to the poor woman who happened to come to the door while the pot was on the fire, she was looked on as an uncanny person ever after and avoided.⁶⁷

One of the best documented of cases were the incidents surrounding Jean Maxwell, tried in Kirkcudbright in 1805 for 'pretending to exercise witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment, conjuration, &c.'. She was found guilty and sentenced to one year's imprisonment in Kirkcudbright Tolbooth. Maxwell, who was considered to be a witch by her community, and a public menace in the eyes of the law, could no longer be formally charged with witchcraft but she was charged, in accordance with the 1735 Witchcraft Act, of pretended witchcraft.⁶⁸ The so-called 'last of the Ayrshire witches', Isabel or Bell M'Ghie, was actually born at Kelton, in Kirkcudbrightshire, in 1760, later residing at Beith in Ayrshire. Though not judicially charged with any crime, her notoriety was increased following an interview (which was later published) by a local archaeologist, Mr James Dobie, in 1835, the year before she died. Bell's reputation mainly derived from healing both humans and animals, or from counter-magical charms. She specialized in dairy problems, but that she was more than a simple charmer is suggested by her own testimony that she had known many witches in her youth, notably a warlock named Douglas whom she feared. He allegedly revived a dead horse and, on another occasion, cast a spell on a minister which rendered him unable to preach in his own pulpit, though he could do so in others, a story reminiscent of that concerning the Rev. Marshall at Kirkmaiden.⁶⁹

An article appeared in the *Dumfries Weekly Journal* in 1826 giving details of a woman in Annan, believed to be suffering from the effects of witchcraft. 'We did not believe that people within sixteen miles of

⁶⁶ *Old Statistical Account*, v, Kirkpatrick-Durham, 248.

⁶⁷ Paterson, *Wamphray*, 186-7.

⁶⁸ *Remarkable Trial of Jean Maxwell, the Galloway Sorceress; which took place at Kirkcudbright on the Twenty-eighth day of June last, 1805; For Pretending to Exercise Witchcraft, Sorcery, Enchantment, Conjuration, &c.* (Kirkcudbright, 1805), 1-24. See also Cowan and Henderson, 'Last of the witches', 212-3.

⁶⁹ A. MacGeorge, *An Ayrshire Witch*, [reprinted from *Good Words* for private circulation] (London, 1886). See also Cowan and Henderson, 'Last of the witches', 212-3.

Dumfries laboured under a state of such superstitious ignorance in the nineteenth century'. The sister of the bewitched woman attacked the suspect, an old woman, with a knife. She tossed her to the ground and 'cut her across the brow!!!—a mode of dissolving the spell considered by the witch-believers of former ages, and, it now appears, even at the present day, to be altogether infallible'.⁷⁰

A writer for *The Gallovidian* (1902), probably more concerned with folktale than reality, discussed a witch who allegedly lived at Hannayston in the Kells in the mid-eighteenth century; 'Some say her name was Nicholas Grier, others that it was Girzie McClegg, but it matters little which now'. She was blamed with stealing butter, causing cows to sicken and sucking milk from them in the shape of a hare. She also appeared as a cat walking on its hind legs. Anyone she disliked, she drowned by 'sinking a caup in the yill-boat [a wooden ale cup in the ale barrel] in her kitchen'. In the midst of so much incredible reportage it is striking that she was said to have muttered her incantations in Gaelic, a language which had probably died out in the area by the sixteenth century. He added that 'although the roasting of them [witches] alive has gone out of fashion now, the witches still exist in most Galloway villages, objects of fear and aversion to the natives'. Feeling the need to excuse the survival of Scottish witch belief, he continued,

The English may hold us up to ridicule for believing such things, but they must not forget that they are devoutly believed in all over England yet; even in London they are far from extinct.⁷¹

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The fatal conclusion to Janet McMuldritche's diabolical activities arose out of comparatively minor incidents involving cattle grazing and the alleged theft of provender. Elspeth Thomson appears to have been the victim of her relatives. In each case the accusers died in inexplicable circumstances, resulting in the execution of McMuldritche and Thomson. The intriguing case of Bessie Paine concerning charming and the knowledge of folk remedies for animals and humans alike, as well as a measure of malefice, might also have resulted in judicial execution had she not died in prison. Elspeth McEwen paid the supreme penalty as late as 1698. Thereafter, punishments for witchcraft were less severe, though the reality of the crime was not, apparently, in doubt, as in the cases of Janet M'Murray, Jean Brown, Janet Wharry, Janet Harestanes and Elspeth Rule. Though the incident is poorly documented, what is claimed to be 'the last trial for witchcraft by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland' occurred at Dumfries in 1709 when Elizabeth Rule was condemned to be branded on the cheek with a red-hot iron; 'People living in 1790 have been told by their parents, that the smoke caused by the

⁷⁰ *Dumfries Weekly Journal*, 7 Nov. 1826.

⁷¹ R. deBruce Trotter, 'No. III. The Witch of Hannayston', *The Gallovidian* 4 (1902) 40-4

torturing process was seen issuing out of the mouth of the unhappy woman'.⁷²

It may be that the concentration of witch cases in Caerlaverock owed something to the zeal of the local ministers, such as Rev. Robert Paton who had been involved in no less than five investigations from 1692 until 1709, and Rev. John Somerville, who participated in at least three cases in 1699 and 1705. There is certainly evidence that opinion in the localities was often in favour of prosecution, while the central authorities were opposed. Individual ministers no doubt had a significant influence upon their congregations. Thus, individuals such as Marshall, Rae, and the impossible Taylor of Wamphray remained intent upon witch-hunting, though not always for the most spiritual of reasons. More women were appearing who were the kindred spirits of Bessie French, one of the great unsung heroines of Annandale, who rejected outright Taylor's preposterous claims and who took her own case to the presbytery with satisfactory results.

Most of the suspected witches appear to have been guilty of no more than folk healing and possibly suspect veterinary practices. Others have the appearance of social misfits or well-known trouble-makers. It seems clear that the zeal for prosecution displayed by certain parish ministers was not shared by the central authorities, as in the case of supposedly witch-ridden Caerlaverock where local enthusiasm for retribution received a tepid reception in Edinburgh. Almost unbelievably, the minister at Kirkmaiden still employed a witch-finder in the late 1690s. But the Rev. Rae was rebuked for labelling a woman a witch and the Rev. Taylor of Wamphray was vehemently (and successfully) denounced by Bessie French for falsely accusing her of witchcraft. Janet Harestanes was a repeat offender, a circumstance that would have been difficult to contemplate a few decades earlier.

Although attitudes were gradually changing, the area was still in the grip of covenanting fervour around 1700, and as such was a potentially dangerous place for women. While most of the examples discussed were perfectly compatible with earlier cases what was novel was the authorities' willingness to spare the accused, Elspeth McEwen excepted. Thus the South West, one of the last Scottish regions to initiate witch prosecution, was also one of the most tenacious in its reluctance to surrender all belief in witches and the evil supposedly caused by them.

⁷² Trial of Elizabeth [Elspeth] Rule, 1709. William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries with notices of Nithsdale, Annandale, and the Western Border* (Edinburgh, 1867), 434-5. Black's *Calendar* cites the *Southern Circuit Book 1708-1710* in MS which I have so far been unable to locate.