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CHAPTER 4
Witch-Hunting and Witch Belief in the Gàidhealtachd
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In 1727, an old woman from Loth in Sutherland was brought before a blazing fire in Dornoch. The woman, traditionally known as Janet Horne, warmed herself, thinking the fire had been lit to take the chill from her bones and not, as was actually intended, to burn her to death. Or so the story goes. This case is well known as the last example of the barbarous practice of burning witches in Scotland. It is also infamous for some of its more unusual characteristics – such as the alleged witch ‘having ridden upon her own daughter’, whom she had ‘transformed into a pony’, and of course, the memorable image of the poor, deluded soul warming herself while the instruments of her death were being prepared. Impressive materials, though the most familiar parts of the story did not appear in print until at least 92 years after the event!¹ Ironically, although Gaelic-speaking Scotland has been noted for the relative absence of formal witch persecutions, it has become memorable as the part of Scotland that punished witches later than anywhere else.

Another irony is that one of the *earliest* Scottish witch-hunts took place in Easter Ross, in 1577-8, when the sheriff of Cromarty authorised the arrest of six men and twenty-six women on assorted charges of witchcraft. Among them was Kenneth Ower, or Coinneach Odhar, identified by the late Rev. William Matheson as none other than the Brahan Seer of tradition. He was (and is) one of the best-known prophets in Scottish history, and was most likely executed as a witch, ‘principal or leader of the art of magic’, in 1578, at Chanonry (Fortrose) on the Black Isle. As Matheson demonstrated, Coinneach the seer operated in a purely Gaelic context in which he was associated with Lewis and Easter Ross. Also charged were Marjory Millar, daughter of Robert Millar, smith in Assynt, as were Thomas McKain Moir McAllane McHenrik, also known as Cassindonisch (*Cas an donais*, Devil’s foot) and Christian Ross; the two last named suffered execution in 1577.² Another was William McGillivray who was accused of having passed to Lady Foulis, at Easter 1577, a small box ‘of witchcraft’, possibly containing spells or ointments.³ Several other Gaelic speakers among those arrested survived to face further charges of witchcraft in the well-known trial of Katherine Ross, Lady Munro of Foulis, in 1590. One was Marion, or Marjory, Neane McAllester, known as Losgoloukart (*Losgagh-luchairt*, which apparently means ‘Burn the Castle’, though precisely why is unknown). In the course of the trial Lady Foulis and others were accused of making ‘pictours’ – figures or likenesses of individuals, known in Gaelic as *corp creadha* – in butter or clay; these were then ‘elfshot’, in other words so-called elf arrowheads, or flints, were thrown at them. It was further alleged that she had consulted the

¹ E. J. Cowan and L. Henderson, ‘The last of the witches? The survival of Scottish witch belief’, in J. Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context* (Manchester, 2002), 205-9. It is not certain when the name Janet Horne was first attributed to the victim; she is not identified in the literature up to and including the time of Scott. In the paper cited it was erroneously stated that Janet Horne is not mentioned in C. D. Bentinck, *Dornoch Cathedral and Parish* (1926). There are, however, references to her on pp. 280 and 461-5. Janet is named in H. M. MacKay, *Old Dornoch: its Traditions and Legends* (Dingwall, 1920), 110.

² W. Matheson, ‘The historical Coinneach Odhar and some prophecies attributed to him’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 46 (1968), 1-23; Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, i, III, 193.

³ His name has various spellings in the record: McGilliewareycht-dame, Mcgillieuorie-dam, McGilliveri-dame, McGillieveridame, McGillevori-dame. Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, i, III, 195-6.

elf folk.⁴ Lady Foulis and her stepson, Hector, were both acquitted by what look like packed assizes. Indeed Hector was chief prosecutor of his stepmother before he was himself accused of witchcraft.⁵ The case depicts a weird fairy tale of internal family rivalries, but it undoubtedly involved several Gaels who paid the supreme penalty.

I

The areas of Scotland most affected by witch-hunting were the Lowland and predominantly Scots-speaking parts of the country. The Highland and Gaelic-speaking regions appear to have been largely, but not entirely, exempt from large-scale witch panics.⁶ One explanation for this has been that the Gaels must have been more tolerant towards witches, though this does not sufficiently allow for the poor survival of evidence. A more convincing argument concerns the role of the Church. It is well known that kirk sessions played a crucial part in the prosecution of Lowland witches; sessions may have been less powerful and slower to take hold in the Highlands.⁷

The terrain of the Highlands may have made it difficult for witch panics to spread out of control, keeping accusations local and specific. The sheer size of some parishes could have acted as an obstacle, at least from the authorities' point of view. There were potential financial barriers to consider since suspects were generally transported to administrative centres to be held before and during trials. Applying for a commission to deal with local cases was also expensive.⁸

What is the *Gàidhealtachd* exactly? This is an interesting question with regard to defining what is meant by Highland witch belief and witch-hunting. The term is a linguistic rather than a geographical one. Areas that we might not regard as part of the *Gàidhealtachd* today – for instance, Perthshire, Stirlingshire, the Angus glens, Dunbartonshire, the Kintyre peninsula, and Arran – were definitely regarded as such in the period of the witch-hunts.⁹ In effect, this broadens the scope of enquiry. Likewise, the adoption of a cultural, rather than a regional, definition allows for the incorporation of evidence of Highland witch belief turning up in non-Highland contexts.

II

The Highlands and Islands have often been regarded as having more tradition, more folklore and more 'superstition' than the rest of the country. However, the most severe punishment of

⁴ Matheson, 'The historical Coinneach Odhar'; Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, i, III, 192-204; P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan's Conspiracy: Magic and Witchcraft in Sixteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2001), 135-41. For more on elf-shot see L. Henderson and E. J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: a History* (East Linton, 2001), 77-9, 93-4, A. Hall, 'Getting shot of elves: healing, witchcraft and fairies in the Scottish witchcraft trials', *Folklore*, 116 (2005), 19-36, and H. Cheape, "'Charms against witchcraft": magic and mischief in museum collections', Chapter 10 below.

⁵ Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, i, III, 201-4.

⁶ C. Lerner, *Enemies of God: the Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London, 1981), 80.

⁷ For kirk sessions in the Highlands see J. Dawson, 'Calvinism and the Gaidhealtachd in Scotland', in A. Pettegree *et al.* (eds), *Calvinism in Europe, 1540-1620* (Cambridge, 1994), and Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 121. Lerner hinted at this in *Enemies of God*, 55-6, 80.

⁸ In the Ross-shire witchcraft cases of 1699, as 'the distance was great, and the travelling expensive', a commission was granted to Robertson of Inshes and 'several other gentlemen of the district, for doing justice on the offenders'. R. Chambers, *Domestic Annals of Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*, 3 vols. (3rd edn, Edinburgh, 1874), iii, 216.

⁹ Cf. C. W. J. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: the Transformation of a Culture Region* (London, 1988), esp. 1-33.

witches took place in the allegedly more ‘civilised’ and supposedly less ‘superstitious’ part of Scotland. The level of witch belief certainly seems to have been shared equally between the Gaelic-speaking and Scots-speaking parts of the country. It has been argued that although witches were equally common in the Highlands as in the Lowlands, when the position of the ‘witch in the community’ is examined, ‘we see the considerable difference in attitudes towards the function of witchcraft in the lowland south’. In the Highlands, ‘where the people were closer to nature and perhaps, understood, or at least tolerated, witches with a charitable or quasi-Christian kindness, there were few instances of the merciless hunts for witches which were so characteristic of almost the whole of the rest of Europe’.¹⁰ In the mid 1970s, Alfred Truckell asserted that on the witch-hunting map of Scotland the Gaelic Highlands and North-West constituted a blank. There were no executions

in the Gaelic-speaking areas proper – only a few on the borders of Gaelic territory . . . and the evidence is almost all primitive magic, cursing, laying on or taking off of illness: hardly any shape-changing, no sabbats, no child-murder or cannibalism: evidence given by simple town or country folk in fact, and not by educated ministers in touch with international writings on the subject – whereas these figure largely in the East and Centre of Scotland.¹¹

It could, of course, be said that there is little evidence of child-murder and cannibalism in Lowland Scotland either. Christina Larner’s excellent *Enemies of God* focused on the main regions of witch-hunting activity (the north, south-eastern, and south-western districts) and as such is almost useless when it comes to Highland witch-hunting. As Larner stated, ‘some areas saw very little witch-hunting. In the Highlands, especially those parts outside the Kirk sessions system and within the dominion of the clans there was no witch-hunting, or none that reached the records’. Furthermore, ‘Gaelic-speaking areas in general provided very few cases although Tain in Ross-shire was an exception to this’. She pointed out that Tain had cases ranging from 1590 to 1699, and that during the great hunt of 1661-2 several cases emerged in Strathglass in which the landlord was unscrupulously using witchcraft accusations as a way of evicting unwanted tenants. ‘On the whole, though’, Larner observed that, ‘Gaelic patronymic names . . . are rare in lists of suspects’. There were, she asserted, ‘no demonic witches in the Highlands and Islands during the period of the hunt’.¹² She noted that in the Highlands ‘witches, like the fairies, were often anonymous’. While I would concur with Larner about the anonymity of the fairies, I do not fully agree with her about the namelessness of Highland witches; I have come to know at least some of them by name. She also stated that if the witches were known individuals they were ‘credited with possessing the evil eye which is regarded as distinct from witchcraft and can cause unintended harm’.¹³

The association of witches with the evil eye is an interesting one, and does raise questions of the regionality of certain beliefs. However, this particular association was by no means peculiar to the Highlands.¹⁴ As for its distinctiveness from witchcraft, MacLagan’s

¹⁰ F. Thomson, *The Supernatural Highlands* (London, 1976), 23.

¹¹ A. E. Truckell, ‘Some notes on witchcraft and magical practices in Dumfries and Galloway’, MS. Dumfries and Galloway Archives, 3.

¹² Larner, *Enemies of God*, 98.

¹³ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 80, 8.

¹⁴ There are many examples of the ‘evil eye’ to be found in the Lowlands. A woman allegedly sold her cow because ‘an ill e’e’ had been put on her: A. Stewart, *Reminiscences of Dunfermline and Neighbourhood* (Edinburgh, 1886), 41. Charms against ‘evil eye’ are noted in W. Henderson, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London, 1879), 187-8. In

study of the *Evil Eye in the Western Highlands* (1902) asserted that ‘there is no witchcraft necessary to the Evil Eye, but that the processes for its cure undoubtedly are witchcraft’. He also commented that ‘it is specially difficult to distinguish between the Evil Eye and witchcraft in the case of loss of the due produce of cattle – butter, cream, &c.’¹⁵ The power of the evil eye was discussed briefly by the physician Martin Martin from Skye, himself a Gael, who travelled throughout the Islands in 1695. He was informed that misfortunes or even death could result from this ill-fated glance, children and cattle being most at risk. Martin could name some of those believed to have ‘this unhappy faculty, tho at the same time void of any ill design’.¹⁶ The idea that the evil eye is not, in itself, witchcraft is reinforced by J. G. Campbell’s comments that the condition is brought on by a ‘discontented and unhappy mind, full of envy (*farmad*), covetousness (*sanntachadh*), and such like mean feelings’. Cures for the evil eye (*eòlas a chronachaidh*) could be obtained from a neighbourhood ‘wise woman’, but could only be carried out on Thursday or Sunday.¹⁷ When a woman admired a child, she would often say, *Gu’m beannaich an Sealbh thu; cha ghabh mo shuil ort* (‘God bless you, my eye shall not punish you’).¹⁸ However, other commentators, such as J. M. McPherson who concentrated mainly, but not exclusively, on the North-East, have stressed the connection between the witch and the power of her gaze; ‘the evil eye was one of the witch’s weapons in most frequent use’ and possession of this ‘gift’ was ‘due to the devil’s instruction’.¹⁹

III

Christina Larner concluded that the ‘impersonal and apolitical witch-beliefs of the Highlands caused less human suffering than the witch-beliefs of central and lowland Scotland’.²⁰ It would be pointless to dispute the substance of this statement, for there is no doubt that the persecution of witches in the Lowlands was, in general, more ferocious and more politically charged than it was in the *Gàidhealtachd*. However, this would be of little comfort to those Gaels who found themselves the victims of an accusation. For this reason alone, it is necessary to take a closer look at the impact witch-hunting had on the Highlands. For example, were there really as few cases as has been generally accepted? The total number of legal accusations and executions in the area listed in the Larner, Lee and McLachlan *Source-*

Orkney, accused witch Katherine Grant (1623) cursed a man by looking over her shoulder and turning up the white of her eye, in G. F. Black, *County Folklore*, vol. iii: *Orkney and Shetland Islands* (London, 1903; repr. London, 1974), 81.

¹⁵ R. C. MacLagan, *Evil Eye in the Western Highlands* (London, 1902; repr. Wakefield, 1972), 216, 129.

¹⁶ Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (2nd edn, 1716; repr. Edinburgh, 1976), 123.

¹⁷ J. G. Campbell, *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1902), 59-66.

¹⁸ W. MacKenzie, ‘Gaelic incantations, charms and blessings of the Hebrides’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 18 (1891-2), 97-182, at p. 131.

¹⁹ J. M. McPherson, *Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland* (London, 1929), 191-3.

²⁰ Larner, *Enemies of God*, 202. Ronald Hutton has observed that one of the less discussed aspects of the Scottish witch trials is ‘their apparent absence from . . . the Gaelic-speaking zone’: ‘The global context of the Scottish witch-hunt’, in Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-hunt in Context*, 31-2. Stuart Macdonald points out that the ‘characterization of the Highlands as an area where the witch-hunt did not occur is far too simplistic. (Nor, if one reads closely, is this what Larner said)’: *The Witches of Fife: Witch-Hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560-1710* (East Linton, 2002), 22.

Book of Scottish Witchcraft (1977) was 89, but revised figures are much higher. The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft (2003) lists at least 6 per cent of all cases – somewhere around 230 individual cases in the Highlands and Islands, most of those occurring in Bute, Argyll, Nairn, Inverness, Ross-shire, Sutherland, and the northern, but mainly non-Gaelic county of Caithness. These may not represent a high percentage, but it is certainly not insignificant if the numbers given for other regions are considered, such as the estimated 2 per cent for the Central region, 5 per cent for Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, 6 per cent for Tayside, 7 per cent for Grampian including Aberdeen, and 9 per cent for the Borders. The worst affected areas were Fife, with an estimated 12 per cent, Strathclyde with 14 per cent, and a staggering 32 per cent from the Lothians.²¹ The earliest reliable Scottish population data come from Webster's census of 1755; this gave a total of 1,265,380 persons in Scotland, of which the four principal Highland counties of Argyll, Ross and Cromarty, Inverness, and Sutherland had 194,707, a figure which represents 15.4 per cent of the national total.²² This is likely to reflect a *minimum* of Gaelic speakers, since it does not include Gaels in the frontier regions mentioned above, such as Dumbarton and Perthshire.

IV

There are several questions that we could ask about the Highland-Lowland divide. Was there really a different conception of who and what witches were, and what powers they possessed? One somewhat self-regarding view suggests that in the Highlands, though people shared a belief in witches, it was of a different nature to that found in the rest of Scotland, or indeed of Europe. The 'evidence on the Highland witches is that while they have many similar points of contact, conduct and attitude with their sisters in the Scottish south, there is, comparatively, very little of the repulsive element in their character'. The gentler witch of the north did not, in this commentator's charitable view, embrace the demonic aspect, making no mention of the 'incubus, the succubus, nor of midnight meetings, Sabbats, dancing with the Devil' and other such common abominations. Nor did Highland witches ride on broomsticks or raise the dead.²³ This was allegedly due to the region's comparative inaccessibility and 'because of the different nature of the fundamental and elemental beliefs of the Highlanders who saw in nature the natural phenomenon rather than the miraculous'. In other words, it was the 'proximity of the Highland lifestyle to nature' that created a notion of the witch as 'more a figure of legend, mythology and folktale, rather than a reality to be feared, hated and persecuted'.²⁴ While the comparatively low demonic content in Highland witchcraft cases may be noteworthy, the witch figure was not just a character from legends and fairy tales.

Comparisons between the motifs and general characteristics found in witch trial testimonials from various regions differ mainly in the level of such activities as entering into a demonic pact, attendance at the witches' sabbat, night-flying, and intercourse with the Devil. Many Highland cases did not concern themselves with demonic interference but rather with the mundane problems of everyday life, particularly disputes between neighbours, or interference with dairy and other agricultural produce. The Devil was not entirely absent from Highland witchcraft cases, as we shall see from the Bute trials in 1662, but rarely played a significant role judging from the trial evidence. However, witch belief in many Lowland cases, when examined at village level, does not suggest that the Devil's presence

²¹ SSW. See also the *Scottish Witch-Hunt Database* (CD-Rom, 2001), compiled by Stuart Macdonald.

²² J. G. Kyd (ed.), *Scottish Population Statistics* (SHS, 1952); Withers, *Gaelic Scotland*, 179-80.

²³ Thomson, *Supernatural Highlands*, 20, drawing on Campbell, *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Scottish Highlands*, 2.

²⁴ Thomson, *Supernatural Highlands*, 20-1.

was a pre-requisite of witchcraft. The involvement of the Devil was overwhelmingly a learned intervention. From this point of view, Highland witch beliefs, as manifested in trial records, are not particularly unique or different from, say, evidence from the south-west of Scotland, another area largely unconcerned with the more colourful demonic aspects of witchcraft.²⁵ The figure of the Devil has, of course, been much more conspicuous within Highland folk tale and tradition in general, known in Gaelic by a variety of different names such as *An donas* ‘the bad one’, *Am fear nach abair mi* ‘the one whom I will not mention’, and *Dòmhnall Dubh* ‘Black Donald’.²⁶

Is there evidence to suggest that Gaelic society was more tolerant of witches? There appear to be no official records of witch trials in Skye and the Outer Hebrides. However, the researches of John MacInnes, based on a vast body of fascinating information drawing upon oral tradition, indicate that unofficial persecution, punishment, and even execution by the community sometimes occurred. One very interesting point that he makes is that there is no native Gaelic word for ‘witch’; the Gaelic word for a (female) witch, *Banabhuidseach*, entered the language at a late stage, perhaps in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. The term now embraces healers and wise women as well as witches. The possible implications for the introduction to the Highlands and Islands of an essentially non-Gaelic word or concept should be considered. Does it mean that ‘at some stage a new kind of “witch” came into Gaelic society, bringing new practices’ or was it ‘only that a new term came into the language, leaving belief and practice unaltered’?²⁷ If it was the former, then a new awareness of the importance of witchcraft, or more specifically of witch-hunting, was evolving within early modern Highland culture.

One reason given for the low number of witchcraft trials in neighbouring Ireland was the near absence of literature on the subject. Unlike England, which had something of a ‘literary war’ on both sides of the debate regarding the reality of witchcraft, Ireland produced only one pamphlet in 1699. The argument is that ‘the absence of this form of literature in Ireland seriously hindered the advance of the belief in (and consequent practice of) witchcraft’.²⁸ Furthermore, judicial torture was not used in the few trials for witchcraft that did take place, and execution by burning at the stake was not used to any extent.²⁹ Ronald Hutton suggests that ‘Gaelic Ireland affords a classic case of a society which did not fear the witch-figure because it ascribed misfortune to other sources’, namely the fairies. ‘If Gaelic Scotland’, he argues, ‘had the same system of belief, together with all its other cultural similarities, then the absence of witch trials there is explained’,³⁰ a suggestion which is not

²⁵ For south-western witch belief see L. Henderson, ‘The survival of witchcraft prosecutions and witch belief in South West Scotland’, *SHR*, 85 (2006), 54-76. See also S. Macdonald, ‘In search of the Devil in Fife witchcraft cases, 1560-1705’, in Goodare (ed.), *The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context*.

²⁶ J. G. Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, ed. R. Black (Glasgow, 1900; repr. Edinburgh, 2005), ch. 12. For more on the Devil’s appearance see J. Miller, ‘Men in black: appearances of the Devil in Scottish witchcraft discourse’, Chapter 6 below.

²⁷ I am grateful to Dr MacInnes for sharing this information with me. See also J. MacInnes, ‘The Church and traditional belief in Gaelic society’, in L. Henderson (ed.), *Fantastical Imaginations: the Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture* (East Linton, 2006, forthcoming).

²⁸ ‘All printed notices of Irish witchcraft, with one possible exception, are recorded in books published outside the country’: St J. D. Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology* (Dublin, 1913; repr. New York, 1992), 12, 16.

²⁹ Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology*, 18-19, 20.

³⁰ Hutton, ‘Global context’, 32.

really tenable because the belief in fairies, which was equally strong in non-Gaelic areas of Scotland, clearly did not lessen the amount of witch persecution. Indeed the opposite could be maintained, namely that the demonisation of fairy belief intensified witch-hunting.³¹ Another commentator has argued that witch-hunting was rare in Ireland because Catholics did not want to denounce witch suspects to Protestant courts. While an interesting theory, it would not be convincing in a Scottish context – for example, the Seton involvement in the North Berwick case.³²

V

Some parallels with the Easter Ross cases of 1577-8 and 1590 appear in the imperfectly reported account of the Argyll witches who became implicated in a murderous conspiracy which threatened to tear apart the great Clan Campbell in the early 1590s.³³ John Campbell of Ardkinglass, among others, was suspected of the assassination of his rival John Campbell of Calder in 1592 and was therefore out of favour with the earl of Argyll. He approached Margaret Campbell, widow of John Og Campbell of Cabrachan, one of the conspirators, to ask whether, through witchcraft, she could arrange his reconciliation with his chief.³⁴ Margaret cunningly responded that witches could do nothing for him unless they were fully informed of the facts. Ardkinglass then not only admitted his guilt but also named all his accomplices in the conspiracy. Much of what is known of the plot against John Campbell of Calder originated with Margaret Campbell who gave her deposition in Gaelic, rendered into Scots by three translators including the bishop of Argyll and the dean of Lismore. She confessed without any kind of torture, interrogators or compulsion, in the process supplying fascinating insights into Highland witch belief.

Ardkinglass, apparently aware that ‘all witchcraft is to be practiced in the begining of every quharter’, and realising that the harvest quarter was approaching, was keen for Margaret to start work. She promised him that she would have something to report before Lammas (1 August).³⁵ After returning home to Lismore, Margaret set about asking her contacts what fate would befall Ardkinglass and his men. Firstly, there was ‘Nichaicherne’, witch in Morvern, who foresaw that the conspirators would be held in Edinburgh but would return home safely. However, one of their number, MacCoul (Duncan Macdougall of Dunollie), though escaping punishment for a long time, ‘at the last wald pay for it’.³⁶ Then there was Euphrick Nikceoll, who ‘tuik upon hir to convert my Lord’s angir and to mak him to favour Ardkinglass’,³⁷ and Dougald Macaurie, who, though he enchanted Ardkinglass’s men, ‘that nae wapin suld offend thame’, failed to enchant Ardkinglass himself. There was

³¹ Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 106-41; cf. J. Goodare, ‘Scottish witchcraft in its European context’, Chapter 1 above.

³² E. C. Lapoint, ‘Irish immunity to witch-hunting, 1534-1711’, *Eire-Ireland*, 27 (1992), 76-92. On the North Berwick trials see Normand and Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft*. See also J. Goodare, ‘The Aberdeenshire witchcraft panic of 1597’, *Northern Scotland*, 21 (2001), 17-37, at p. 30, for the earls of Huntly and Errol, Catholics heavily involved in witch-hunting.

³³ E. J. Cowan, ‘Clanship, kinship and the Campbell acquisition of Islay’, *SHR*, 58 (1979), 132-57, at p. 139.

³⁴ According to Margaret Campbell’s deposition, Ardkinglass consulted her as it was heard tell that the women of Lorn were wiser than the women elsewhere in Argyll: *HP*, i, 159-60.

³⁵ *HP*, i, 165.

³⁶ *HP*, i, 165.

³⁷ Euphrick Nikceoll was taught her charms by old Mackellar of Cruachan, who in turn learned them at the priory of Icolmkill (Iona): *HP*, i, 166.

also a Lismore woman, ‘Mary voir Nicvolvoire vic Coil vic Neil, quha is not ane witch but sche will see things to cum be sum second sicht’.³⁸

Margaret Campbell confessed that her late husband, John Og, the conspirator, had several times consulted witches and that she had been present when these witches had promised him that they would restore him to Argyll’s favour. She named Katherene NicClaartie and Nichachlerich in ‘Blargoir’. From Lismore, Euphrick Ninicol roy counselled John Og to leave the country in haste for she saw ‘an evil hour come on him’, and Christian Nichean vic Couil vic Gillespie took it upon herself ‘to do gude to John Oig’.

By September 1593, Ardkinglass had become unimpressed by Margaret Campbell’s efforts. He told her that he had found a far better enchanter than any of her contacts: a minister, Patrick MacQueen.³⁹ Ardkinglass asked Margaret if the witches she employed had invoked God or Jesus in their spells, to which she replied ‘that the witches namit God in thair words’. He then informed her that MacQueen did not cite God in his practices, and that his witchcraft and enchantments were being hindered by these witches and their naming of God. He therefore commanded her to ‘discharge all the witches’ immediately. MacQueen’s apparent inability to counter the influence of the God-invoking witches seems to contradict Ardkinglass’s alleged claim that he was so skilled in his craft that he could make up and build a castle between sundown and sunrise! A confused passage in the deposition seems to suggest that MacQueen foretold that Ardkinglass and Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy would be arrested but would subsequently escape through his own intervention. It appears that the minister also claimed that if he were captured he would escape by invoking seven devils who attended him. As proof of his powers he confided to Ardkinglass that the countess of Argyll’s first child would be a girl and the second a boy. He darkly predicted that Argyll would lose a battle in which the heir to the comital family would fall – an obscure passage which has been interpreted as a reference to the Battle of Glenlivet (October 1594) when Archibald Campbell of Lochnell was killed. A further claim attributed to MacQueen was that if he was permitted to practice his craft for seven years unchallenged, he would make Argyll repent his actions, driving him from place to place and allowing him no rest until

he brocht him to the end of his lyfe quhilk suld be in the Lawlands and upon the cassay [i.e. causeway] of Edinbrought and funder that geif [i.e. if] he wes sufferit to perseveir in his doing he suld mak the hail name of Campbell in Argyll to fall, the housis of Ardkinglass and Glenurqhye alone excepted, and that in the end the hail suld be pairtit betwixt theye twa and that theye suld differ amang themselves extreamly for the hail leivings of the Campbells and that the sword suld end the matter amang thame.⁴⁰

The witches of Margaret Campbell’s acquaintance were mostly women who had the gift of second sight, a feature which seems to be consistent with Highland witch beliefs in general. Perhaps an unexpected feature is that while the witches invoked the power of God to enhance their skills, the minister, who was also second sighted, did not.

³⁸ Though she was privy to the secrets of the conspiracy, no mention is made in the deposition records of Mary’s personal prediction on the matter: *HP*, i, 166-7.

³⁹ According to the editor of *HP* this was Patrick MacQueen, son of Patrick Oig MacQueen, who was minister of Rothesay in 1589 and transferred to Monzie in 1595. He is mentioned in a contemporary narrative as ‘Patrik McQuene ane deboysched and depryved minister’ who testified against Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy in 1601: *The Black Book of Taymouth, with Other Papers from the Breadalbane Charter-Room*, ed. C. Innes (Bannatyne Club, 1855), 36.

⁴⁰ *HP*, i, 167-9.

VI

It would seem that wherever the Kirk spread its tentacles, witch persecution followed. In the Highlands, however, the situation was different from the rest of Scotland. The combination of kirk sessions, presbyteries and synods, although it operated like a well-oiled machine in the greater Edinburgh area, stalled as it approached the Highlands and Islands. The first meeting of the synod of Argyll at Inveraray did not take place until 1639 and it was responsible not only for Argyll, but also for Arran and Bute, the western mainland of Inverness as far north as Glenelg, and the Inner and Outer Hebrides.⁴¹ Church business was a geographical nightmare, as many ministers could not make it to the meetings. In 1643, the synod decided that the ministers of Skye had to attend the meetings only every two years, in consideration of the long distance, the difficulties of both sea and land travel, and the time spent away from their flocks. The large size of parishes was also an issue. In 1642 it was decided that Arran and Islay would require two ministers each.⁴² Despite the difficulties, the synod referred a man charged with sorcery to the presbytery of Inveraray, sent another to a civil judge for using a divinatory charm known as ‘turning the riddle’, and demolished a healing well at Loch Long that was being used ‘superstitiously’ to cure diseases.⁴³ In 1649 the synod appointed several brethren ‘to take tryall of all witches, sorcerers, charmers, palmisters, juglurs, second sighted divyners, soothsayers, nicromancers, consulters with spirits and such lyke’.⁴⁴ At the peak of its ascendancy, presbyterianism’s grip was reaching for the innards of Argyll and the Isles.

Four suspects were rounded up by the provost of Tain in 1628, of whom Agnes Nein Donald in Bruach and Marion Nein Gillimicaell in the parish of Edirtayne had ‘long been suspected of witchcraft’. The women absconded, ‘thinking heereby to eshew thair deserved punishment’.⁴⁵ Another Ross-shire case, in 1629, generated a list of suspects for trial, including such women as Katharine Nein Rob Auchtie, Marie Nein Eane Eir alias McIntoshe, Katharine Memphersoun alias Naunnchie, and Gradoche Neinechat, ‘who have been long suspected of witchcraft’.⁴⁶

The year 1662 was a particularly bad year for witch-hunting across Scotland, and the Highlands were no exception. In May of that year, a commission was granted to Sir George MacKenzie of Tarbat to investigate Agnes Nein Donald Oig, Jonet Nein Donald Vic William Vic More, and Mary Nein Jon Vic Gilchrist at Scatwell in Ross-shire.⁴⁷ At Nairn in June, Agnes Nic Ean Vane and Agnes McGillivorich confessed to witchcraft.⁴⁸ Another

⁴¹ *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll, 1639-1651*, ed. D. C. MacTavish (Edinburgh, 1943), p. xii.

⁴² *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll*, 73, 54-5.

⁴³ *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll*, 46, 84, 59.

⁴⁴ *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll*, 153.

⁴⁵ *RPC*, 2nd ser., ii, 489. The provost, John MacCulloch of Tain, was granted a commission to apprehend and try four suspects: Helen Gow (wife of Finlay McAllane, cordiner in Tain), Elspeth Simsoun in Badarrachin parish of ‘Kincairdin’, Agnes Nein Donald in Bruach parish of Logie, and Marion Nein Gillimichaell in the parish of Edirtayne. As in so many cases it is difficult to be sure whether such persons should be classified as Gaels, though the last two names seem to be Gaelic. However, the folk of Tain were later known as ‘Highland Lowlanders’, a situation that may have already been detectable by the early 17th century.

⁴⁶ Commission to Colin, earl of Seaforth, and Mr Alexander MacKenzie of Culcowie, *RPC*, 2nd ser., iii, 15-16.

⁴⁷ *RPC*, 3rd ser., i, 207.

⁴⁸ *RPC*, 3rd ser., i, 221.

commission was granted in June 1662 to Hew Fraser of Belladrum and others to try several witches, all with Gaelic names, in Conveth parish, Inverness-shire.⁴⁹ In July, these prosecutions were extended and a further list of suspects (including some of those already accused) was pooled from tenants living on the Chisholm lands of Strathglass in what appears to have been a cruel scheme on behalf of the Chisholms to regain their lands – an early, and demonic, example of ‘clearance’. The suspects, who were part of a Maclean colony who had occupied the lands for some two or three hundred years, were ‘illegally and cruelly treated’ by Alexander Chisholm of Commer ‘having conceavit ane inveterat hatred against the suplicants because he could not gett them removed from their lands and possessions in the legall way’. A petition by Sir Rory Mclean of Dowart against Chisholm was sadly too little, too late, for the women were ‘barbrouslie tortured . . . by waking, hanging them up by the thombes, burning the soles of their feet at the fyre, drawing of others at horse taills and binding of them with widdies about the neck and feet and carrying them so alongst on horseback to prison, wherby and by other tortur one of them hath become distracted, another by their cruelty is departed this lyfe, and all of them have confest whatever they were pleasit to demand of them’.⁵⁰ Several of the unfortunate victims allegedly died in prison and were never ‘brought to confession’.⁵¹

The possible overlap between Highland and Lowland witch beliefs is seen in the chance survival of what appears to be a series of precognitions relating to a particularly large witchcraft panic in Bute in 1662. At least twenty people were accused and, possibly, four or maybe five were executed on the orders of a commission granted by the privy council. There is a considerable amount of material so the following remarks will be highly selective.⁵² Many of the suspects confessed to entering into a covenant with the Devil, who appeared to them in various guises such as a ‘little brown dog’, a cat, a handsome young man, a ‘black rough fierce man’, and as a ‘gross copperfaced man’; he baptised them and gave them a new name. Many spoke of large gatherings with the Devil and other witches, often around Halloween. At these ‘covens’, some of the witches told of a ‘young lasse’, called Mcillmartin, who had black hair, a broad face, and a merry disposition, who was ‘maiden’ at the meetings.⁵³ (This is reminiscent of the trial of Isobel Goudie in Auldearn, also in 1662, who spoke of ‘the maiden’ as the Devil’s favourite.⁵⁴) The witches were blamed for different

⁴⁹ Suspected witches in Conveth were Beak Nean Finlay Vic Ean Vic Homas, Jonet Nein Ean Cheill, Donald Vic McPhaill, Beak Nein Ean Duy Vic Finley, Kathrin Nein Ean Vic Conell Eir, Jonet Nein Rory Buy, Cormule Nean Ean Duy Vic Conchie Vic Goune, Mary Nein Allaster Vic Conchy, Cristian Nein Ferquhar Vic Ewin, Cristian Nein Phaill, and Mary Nein Gowin. The commission also tried Muriall Duy Nein Giliphadrick, in Buntoit. A commission was also granted to Hew Fraser and Chisholm of Commer to try Issobell Duff from the town of Inverness. *RPC*, 3rd ser., i, 233-4.

⁵⁰ Cristian Neil Ferquhar Vic Ean and Mary Nein Goune once again appear on the list of suspects from Strathglass with a further 15 possible new additions: Hectour and Donald McCleanes, Jonet McClean, Margaret McClean, Ninian Coell, Kathrin Ninian Ear Vic Ean Culleam, Jonet Ninian Rory Mie, Mary McFinlay Vic Comes, Kathrin Nyn Owan Vic Omnoch, Mary Dollour, Kathrin Nein Ferquhar McEan, Gormyle Grant, Baike Ninian Dowie Vic Finley, Baik McNish, Mary Muarn Vic Innish, and ‘certain others’. *RPC*, 3rd ser., i, 237.

⁵¹ W. Mackay, ‘The Strathglass witches of 1662’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 9 (1879-80), 113-21.

⁵² *HP*, iii, 3-30; *RPC*, 3rd ser., i, 208.

⁵³ *HP*, iii, 8. For more on the Devil’s appearance see Miller, ‘Men in black’.

⁵⁴ Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, iii, 602-16.

calamities including the death of children and horses by ‘shooting’⁵⁵ them, causing a cow to produce blood instead of milk, inflicting an illness on a man that simulated the pains of childbirth, and creating a storm at sea by casting a pebble into the water. One woman, who was breastfeeding, claimed that she had dreamed that one of the witches took a violent bite out her breast; when she awoke her milk was gone and her breast was blue where she had been nipped.⁵⁶ Another woman, while dreaming, saw a suspected witch and when she awoke her child was gravely ill. The mother implored the witch to heal her child but the witch said that the child had been twice shot and nothing could be done.⁵⁷

One of the more disturbing confessions was made by Margaret NcWilliam, who had lost her horse and cows and was in great poverty when the Devil came to her and said, ‘be not afraid for you shall get rings enough’. However, what he wanted in return was NcWilliam’s seven year old son. She duly shot him with a fairy stone given her by the Devil and the boy died instantly, ‘which grieved her most of anything that ever she did’. We will never know if NcWilliam actually murdered her own child or, in her grief, simply blamed herself for his untimely death. She was singled out in the records as one who ‘since the memory of any alive’ that knew her, ‘went under the name of a witch’. She had been accused of witchcraft, and imprisoned, in 1631, 1645, 1649, and here once again in 1662. On this occasion her luck ran out for she was executed.⁵⁸

Some of the other women accused could cure certain illnesses with rituals, charms and herbs. Some of the rituals involved transference of the disease onto an animal, such as a cat. One woman had Gaelic charms against the evil eye, as well as to heal children of the ‘Glaick’ (bewitchment), which she could do, she said, ‘without suffering either a dog or catt’.⁵⁹ Another woman could cure the fairy blast.⁶⁰

The proximity of Bute to the mainland, especially the counties of Renfrew and Ayrshire, perhaps allowed easier access to Lowland ideas. Some of the evidence from Bute could just as easily have been recorded in East Lothian, such as the high demonic content, the pact made with the Devil, witches meeting in covens, or ‘pocks of witchcraft’ – pouches containing spells and charms. Can we detect a Gaelic element in the confessions? Perhaps the stress on charming, the use of fairy and Gaelic spells, the importance of dreams, and the evil eye can be attributed to local belief, though much of this type of material can be found in the Lowlands as well. What is perhaps of greater significance is that many of the charms and spells were specifically stated to have been in Irish, that is, Gaelic. Jonat Mcneill allegedly used a deadly Gaelic charm against Jonat Man’s son, but Man did not understand the language, which made the securing of a counter-spell problematic.⁶¹ Gaelic was used to charm a calf, when applying ointment to sprains and bruises in humans, and to protect people from accidents or the evil eye. One such formula began ‘*Obi er bhrachaadh* etc’;⁶² another was quoted as ‘*er brid na bachil duin* etc’.⁶³

An unusual case occurred in 1665. When Robert Douglas of Auchintulloch, Loch

⁵⁵ The term ‘shooting’ here refers to elf-shot – magical projectiles in the form of arrows or darts.

⁵⁶ *HP*, iii, 19-20.

⁵⁷ *HP*, iii, 3.

⁵⁸ *HP*, iii, 14-20.

⁵⁹ *HP*, iii, 4, 9.

⁶⁰ *HP*, iii, 23-4.

⁶¹ *HP*, iii, 4.

⁶² *Obaidh* meant a ‘charm’ or ‘incantation’: MacKenzie, ‘Gaelic incantations’, 101.

⁶³ *HP*, iii, 5-6, 9.

Lomond, was accused of the accidental slaughter of Walter Lindsay at the Boat of Bonhill, a ferry-crossing in the Vale of Leven, some highlanders alleged that he was ‘in a distraction bewitched’. The synod of Glasgow was merciful, accepting the witnesses’ evidence that Douglas was ‘not in his naturall witts the tyme of the unhappie slauchter’ and it was well-known that, for several weeks beforehand, he was ‘bewitched’.⁶⁴

In 1669, More Roy, More Nain Duy McIvers and Margaret Nein Vayne were held at Castle Tioram in Inverness-shire on suspicion of witchcraft.⁶⁵ In the justiciary court records for Argyll is the trial of a native of the Appin region, Donald McIlmichall, in Inveraray in 1677. He was described as ‘a common vagabond’, and stood accused of stealing horses and cattle. He was further charged with ‘that horrid cryme of corresponding with the devill and consulting him anent stollen goods and getting informatione for discoverie thereof’.⁶⁶ He saw fairies inside a hill, probably at Dalnasheen (the field of the fairy hill), and on the island of Lismore. His case is of interest for several reasons. He was a Gael, he was male, and he met with the fairies. It was the latter reason that would ensure a more serious charge of ‘consulting with evill spirits’ which led to his execution for witchcraft.⁶⁷ The imposition of ‘learned’ (and possibly Lowland) ideas upon local folkloric beliefs about witchcraft, specifically the way fairies were demonised, is evident in this trial. Fairies showed up in other cases, such as that of Jean Campbell, investigated for charming by the Rothesay kirk session in 1660 which reported that she ‘gangs with the faryes’.⁶⁸ In this instance, we can speculate that Campbell learned her charming skills from the elves.

VII

Travellers’ accounts are an important source of information, and one of the best comes from Martin Martin. Although he was not particularly interested in fairies or witches, he did draw a subtle, and perhaps unconscious, distinction between charming and witchcraft. He reported that it was ‘a receiv’d opinion in these islands’ and ‘in the neighbouring part of the main land, that women by a charm . . . are able to convey the increase of their neighbours cows milk to their own use’. The charmed milk did not produce ‘the ordinary quantity of butter; and the curds made of that milk are so tough, that it cannot be made so firm as other cheese’.

There is much of interest in this account. The crime is one specifically committed by women. And, these women are implicitly called ‘charmners’ as opposed to ‘witches’, a distinction not necessarily made with regard to this crime elsewhere in Scotland. The act of taking away breast-milk from nurses, however, was clearly recognised as an act of witchcraft, and not charming. Martin was present when an allegation of this type was made. He had seen four women who had presented themselves as candidates for wet-nursing. After only three days of suckling the baby, the milk of the one who was chosen dried up. Another nurse was put in her place, but meanwhile, the first nurse’s milk returned to her, the effect, some thought, ‘of witchcraft by some of her neighbours’. If stealing milk was the preserve of women, interfering with the production of ale was apparently a male domain. Martin was told of charmners who had the ‘art of taking away the increase of malt’ which resulted in an ale

⁶⁴ *HP*, iii, 31-5.

⁶⁵ *RPC*, 3rd ser., iii, 78.

⁶⁶ *HP*, iii, 36-7.

⁶⁷ *HP*, iii, 37-8; *Justiciary Records of Argyll and the Isles, 1664-1705*, 2 vols., eds J. Cameron and J. Imrie (Stair Society, 1949-69), i, 80-2; Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, 42-3, 46, 62, 66, 172.

⁶⁸ J. K. Hewison, *The Isle of Bute in the Olden Time*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1895), ii, 264.

that lacked ‘life or good taste’.⁶⁹

Witches were apparently still rampant in Martin’s day. In 1698, the presbytery of Tain heard complaints from their brethren in Sutherland that ‘the practice of witchcraft was common among their people, and they therefore desire to know the Presbytery’s advice’. It was decided that in the parishes of Sutherland and Ross,

where there is ground to believe that spells, charms, or any other practice of witchcraft are practised, the ministers of these parishes shall preach on that subject and set forth the sin of witchcraft, and all the practices relating thereto, and to take action against all such who are charged therewith according to the rules of the Church.⁷⁰

On the Black Isle, a warrant to examine the cases of three women in Fortrose was granted in 1699.⁷¹ Between 1699 and 1700, a commission was granted in Ross-shire to try twelve people for the ‘diabolical crimes and charms of witchcraft’.⁷² In 1706, the privy council imposed the ‘extreme penalty’ upon two men for ‘witchcraft and malefice’ and they were executed in Inverness.⁷³ The synod of Ross in 1737 legislated against using counter-charms, such as scoring the suspected witch’s forehead.⁷⁴ Three men appeared before the presbytery of Tain in 1750 for a series of attacks on women; they had dragged them from their beds and ‘cast them on the hard and cold floor, without allowing them any time to put on any of their clothes, except their shirts, using most horrid cursing and imprecations, calling them witches and devils’. One of the men then ‘scored and cut their foreheads with an iron tool to the effusion of blood’.⁷⁵ All three men were rebuked before the congregations at Rosskeen and Alness for their ‘grievous scandal’. One of the attackers, who blamed his consumption or tuberculosis on the witches, claimed that he was trying to recover his health.⁷⁶ The long persistence of witchcraft cases in Tain might possibly be attributed to the town’s situation on a frontier zone between Gaels and Lowlanders of the type that Hugh Miller would later describe in Cromarty.⁷⁷

Many late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travellers expected to hear about the supernatural, since Scotland was regarded as a backward country preserving primitive cultures and superstitions. The *Gàidhealtachd* was especially targeted in this regard. Lord Grange’s report of 1724-5 to Viscount Townshend, secretary of state, observed that the ‘barbarous’ Highlanders ‘are much addicted to a kind of sorcery and charming; and it is commonly said that . . . there are still several among them who deall with familiar spirits’.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Martin, *Description*, 121-2.

⁷⁰ C. MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland, from the Revolution (1688) to the Present Time* (Inverness, 1915), 15.

⁷¹ Trial of Margaret Provost, Margaret Bezok and Mary NicInnarich, Fortrose, 6 Oct. 1699. C. Larner *et al.*, *A Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* (Glasgow, 1977), 275-7.

⁷² Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, iii, 216-17; Larner *et al.*, *Source-Book*, 280.

⁷³ Lachlan and George Rattray; Chambers, *Domestic Annals*, iii, 302.

⁷⁴ MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 50-1, 72-3, 77-8, 145.

⁷⁵ Tain Presbytery Records, 25 July 1750, quoted in MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 199-206; MacPherson, *Primitive Beliefs*, 223.

⁷⁶ The counter-spell did not work as the man died shortly thereafter: MacNaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*, 204, 206.

⁷⁷ H. Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1835). Cf. L. Henderson, ‘The Natural and Supernatural Worlds of Hugh Miller’, in L. Borley (ed.), *Celebrating the Life and Times of Hugh Miller* (Cromarty, 2003).

⁷⁸ NAS, ‘Account of the Highlanders and Highlands by Lord Grange for Viscount Townshend,

He may of course have been feeding the preconceptions and prejudices of his patron. Grange, after all, was the man who marooned his unfortunate wife on St Kilda.⁷⁹

Thomas Pennant was intrigued to discover, in 1769, that Perthshire ‘still retains some of its ancient customs and superstitions’. He came across a variety of customs and beliefs, still very much alive, though witchcraft, he thought, had died out in certain places. Of Perthshire he remarked, ‘the notion of witchcraft is quite lost: it was observed to cease almost immediately on the repeal of the witch act’. The drawback of being a tourist was that knowledge acquired, and impressions formed, were at times shaped by the particular people encountered. Had he ventured to Kenmore he might have learned of a series of investigations into witchcraft and charming, the last of which occurred in 1753. As he progressed northwards, to Banffshire and Speyside, he discovered that witch beliefs were not yet extinguished, ‘even in this cultivated country’. Many were still bleeding supposed witches, for instance. Pennant seemed puzzled to find witches more strongly entrenched in the richer farmlands of the north-east than in the hardier landscapes of Breadalbane.⁸⁰

Robert Kirk, an episcopalian minister and well-respected Gaelic scholar from Balquhider and Aberfoyle, was more interested in Scotland’s fairy folk than in its witches when he wrote his *Secret Common-Wealth* (1691).⁸¹ However, he did provide a couple of tantalising clues regarding the nature of witch belief in late seventeenth century Perthshire. He commented on the ‘skilfull women’ who stole milk, by way of a hair-tether, from their neighbours cows and ‘convey’d to their homes by secret pathes . . . by art Magic’. The milk could be carried ‘as far off as a bull will be heard to roar’. The way to recover the stolen milk was ‘a bitter chydning of the suspected inchanters, charging by a counter-charme to give them back their own, in God, or their Masters name’.⁸² Kirk, like Martin Martin, referred to such women not as witches but as ‘skilfull women’ or ‘inchanters’ – a subtle, yet important distinction.

Kirk also referred to a woman from Colonsay, who had lived there at the time of the Montrose wars in the 1640s. She was alleged to have second sight, which Kirk thought was unusual as, in his view, only men were so gifted. ‘Being asked who gave her such sights and warnings’ she revealed that ‘as soon as she sett three crosses of straw upon the palm of her hand, a great ugly Beast sprang out of the earth, neer her and flew in the air’. If the answer to her question was positive ‘the Beast would descend calmly, and lick up the crosses’: otherwise it would ‘furiously thurst her and the crosses over on the ground, and so vanish to his place’.⁸³ Again, Kirk did not specifically refer to this woman as a witch although she was seemingly involved in a diabolical ritual of some sort. Her powers were not ‘natural’; that is,

Secretary of State’, 29 Dec. 1724 and 2 Jan. 1725, GD/124/15/1263.

⁷⁹ M. Harman, *An Isle Called Hirte: a History and Culture of St. Kilda to 1930* (Watnish, 1997), 90-1.

⁸⁰ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland in 1769* (3rd edn, Warrington, 1829; repr. Perth, 1979), 95-7, 141.

⁸¹ Kirk rarely referred specifically to witches, though see these passages: ‘albeit were-wolves and witches true bodies, are (by the union of the spirit of nature, that runs thorow all, echoing and doubling the blow towards another) wounded at hom, when the astral assumed bodies are stricken elsewhere’, and the somewhat obscure ‘in a witches eye the beholder cannot see his own image reflected’. Robert Kirk, *The Secret Common-Wealth*, ed. S. Sanderson (Cambridge, 1976), 57, 82.

⁸² It was possible to prevent such magical theft of milk by putting a little of the mother’s dung on the calf’s mouth before it started to suckle: Kirk, *Secret Common-Wealth*, 53-4.

⁸³ Kirk, *Secret Common-Wealth*, 68-9.

she was not claiming to be born with them, but rather acquired her secret knowledge via the ‘beast’ who appeared during her ritual. Such claims were not unusual in cases of witchcraft where suspects had been known to confess that the fairies were responsible for any magical powers – including second sight – they might have had.⁸⁴

Kirk said little about witches – he was, after all, writing on second sight and fairy belief – but he did mention the devil’s mark and witch-pricking: the ‘damnable practise of evil angels, their sucking of blood and spirits out of witches bodys (till they drein them, into a deformed and dry leanness) to feed their own vehicles withal, leaving what wee call the Witches mark behind’. Kirk regularly placed distinctive interpretations upon the evidence he gathered. It was ‘evil angels’, a more theologically-sophisticated phrase to describe the more recognisable demons or familiar spirits found elsewhere in Scotland, that sucked the life-force out of witches, leaving them drained and withered. Kirk had himself seen the evidence: ‘a spot that I have seen as a smal mole horny and brown coloured, throw which mark, when a large brass pin was thrust (both in buttock, nose and roof of mouth) till it bowed and became crooked; the witches, both men and women, neither felt a pain, nor did bleed, nor knew the precise time when this was a doing to them (their eyes only being covered)’.⁸⁵ Unfortunately he did not say when or where he saw this test of guilt being conducted.

VIII

People in the rest of Scotland believed that Gaels were particularly prone to witchcraft. Some of these Gaels, indeed, resided, in the Lowlands. One of the witches executed for her part in the affair at North Berwick kirk was known as ‘Ersche Marioun’, that is, Irish or Gaelic-speaking.⁸⁶ Catherine MacTargett, an East Lothian witch of 1688, described her initiation into the diabolic arts but made no mention of the more exotic details found in some confessions.⁸⁷ There were no wild parties or sex with the Devil, and no flying through the air to covens. However, MacTargett maintained that she entered the service of the Devil through the instruction of a Highland woman called Margaret McLain who bade her to renounce her baptism. That a woman from Dunbar should have claimed to have learned her art from a Highlander is perhaps more revealing than if she had declared the Devil had taught her, for many Lowlanders would have had a poor view of Gaels at the time. A witch in Galloway in the mid eighteenth century was accused of stealing butter and sucking milk from cows in the shape of a hare. She was said to have muttered her incantations in Gaelic, a language which had died out in the area probably by the sixteenth century.⁸⁸

The incident in Paisley (1696-7) involving the bewitchment of eleven-year-old Christian Shaw included Highland suspects. The episode began when Christian accused one of the maids in the house of stealing milk. The thieving maid was a Highlander named Katherine Campbell, who, it is said, was ‘of a proud and revengeful temper, and much addicted to cursing and swearing’, and in a rage did say to Christian, ‘The Devil harle [drag] your soul through hell’. Very soon after, Christian’s seizures began and she accused Campbell as one of her tormentors. During the time of Christian’s bewitchment, ‘there came

⁸⁴ Henderson and Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief*, ch. 4.

⁸⁵ Kirk, *Secret Common-Wealth*, 97.

⁸⁶ Pitcairn (ed.), *Trials*, ii, II, 543. The unfortunate Marioun, complete with soubriquet, was also mentioned in despatches by Robert Bowes in 1590; *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603*, 13 vols., eds J. Bain et al. (Edinburgh, 1898-1969), x, 467.

⁸⁷ *RPC*, 3rd ser., xiii, 245-62.

⁸⁸ R. deBruce Trotter, ‘No. III. The witch of Hannayston’, *The Gallovidian*, vol. 4, no. 13 (1902), 40-4.

an old Highland fellow to Bargarran, who, calling himself a weary traveller', was brought into the kitchen to receive alms. In another part of the house, Christian began to exhibit the signs of demonic possession and her mother brought her down to the kitchen, asking the 'Highland fellow' to take her daughter's hand, which he did; 'the girl immediately upon his touch was grievously tormented in all the parts of her body'.⁸⁹ This is just a small sample, but it can be seen that Highlanders as practising witches are to be found in Lowland witch cases, thus broadening the scope of enquiry. Such accounts may well have reinforced the idea among Lowlanders that witches were more numerous in the Highlands than elsewhere.

IX

It is generally assumed that witch belief survived much longer in the *Gàidhealtachd* than elsewhere. There are indeed late references to witches, such as in Skye in 1880 where members of the Free Kirk at Uig petitioned against a mother and daughter who 'by evil arts take the milk from the neighbours' cows', but some of my own research suggests similarly late evidence in Lowland Scotland, again in the south west.⁹⁰

There are many wonderful stories of witches in the oral tradition. Hugh Miller of Cromarty's account of a witch by the name of Stine Bheag o' Tarbat (Sheena Veg) related to events in 1738, orally communicated to Miller who published the story in 1835. Stine Bheag, who muttered her spells in Gaelic, was 'much consulted by seafaring men' as she could control the winds.⁹¹ The English engineer Edmund Burt, based in Inverness from the late 1720s to the late 1730s, commented upon the widespread acceptance of witchcraft that he encountered in the Highlands. Burt had an argument with a local laird and a minister on the topic; in an effort to persuade the sceptical Burt of the reality of witchcraft, the minister related a story he felt sure would convince him. A 'certain Highland laird' discovered that some of his wine was being stolen. The servants were cleared of any blame, and so witchcraft was suspected. Late one night, the laird went to his cellar 'at an hour when he thought it might be watering-time with the hags', and under cloak of darkness, sprang into the room swinging his broadsword to and fro until he was sure he had hit one of the culprits. In the darkness he could make out the eyes of several cats, but when he lit a candle they had vanished, leaving nothing but some blood on the floor. The laird immediately went to the house of a reputed witch, an old woman who lived some two miles away. Inside her hut, he found her in bed, bleeding effusively and 'casting his eye under the bed, there lay her leg in its natural form!' Much to the puzzlement of the minister, Burt was far from persuaded by the story and continued to express his disbelief. His host turned to the minister and said, 'Sir, you must no mind Mr. Burt, for he is an atheist'.⁹²

X

This brief survey suggests that the richness of traditions about Highland witches in folklore is matched by the survival of a surprising amount of information in the historical record. The

⁸⁹ *A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire* (Paisley, 1877), 71-2, 98-9. For more on this case see B. P. Levack, 'Demonic possession in early modern Scotland', Chapter 7 below.

⁹⁰ A. A. MacGregor, *The Peat-Fire Flame: Folk-Tales and Traditions of the Highlands and Islands* (1937; repr. Edinburgh, 1947), 262; Henderson, 'The survival of witchcraft prosecutions and witch belief in South West Scotland'.

⁹¹ Miller, *Scenes and Legends*, 269-76. In Gaelic stories, the witches of Lewis are noted as the best for raising winds: A. Bruford, 'Scottish Gaelic witch stories: a provisional type list', *Scottish Studies*, 2 (1967), 13-47.

⁹² Edmund Burt, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London*, ed. A. Simmons (London, 1754; repr. Edinburgh, 1998), 148-52.

number of persecutions certainly seems larger than is often assumed, while the number of executions, though indeterminate, is not insignificant. Evidence of Highland witches and witch beliefs surfacing in non-Highland contexts, if considered, may well boost the numbers even further.

When compared with other parts of Scotland, it is hard to find anything particularly unique or distinctive about Gaelic witch beliefs. There was, perhaps, greater emphasis given to second sight, the significance of dreams, and the power of the evil eye, although these can also be found in non-Gaelic contexts. J. G. Campbell's comment that Highland witches were less 'repulsive' than their 'southern sisters', less likely to engage in demonic pacts, attend sabbats or raise the dead, is to some extent true though there are plenty of examples where Lowland witches were equally uninvolved or uninterested in the demonic side of witchcraft. As elsewhere in Scotland, Gaelic witches might speak with the fairies, transform into cats, or murder children, but they were more often blamed for stealing milk, charming cattle, or foreseeing the future.

Janet Horne from Sutherland may have been the last to suffer the pain, terror and ignominy of a brutal execution, but many had perished before her. Witch persecution in Gaelic-speaking Scotland is far from a blank canvas, and I, for one, think it is time to fill in at least some of the blanks – which in fact are less numerous than commentators such as Truckell or Larnier assumed – and finally give proper acknowledgement to all those who lost their lives.