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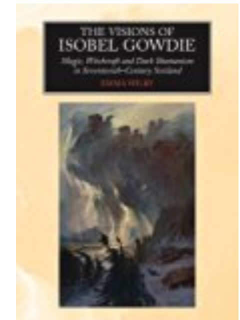
Emma Wilby. *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Shamanism and Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Scotland.* Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010. xi + 604 pp. $65.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84519-180-1.



Reviewed by Paul Jenkins

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

In the summer of 1662, Isobel Gowdie of the parish of Auldearn in northeastern Scotland was convicted for witchcraft, bringing to an end one of the most extraordinary cases on record in Britain. At the heart of her trial was a series of four confessions recorded between April 13 and May 27. Celebrated for their vivid detail, descriptive power, and contentious, often lurid, subject matter, these confessions provide both an unusual and rich view into the liminal early modern world of witches, demons, and fairies. Isobel claimed that she first met with the devil in the church of Auldearn, whence she renounced Christ and was given the devil's mark, and, with her own blood, rebaptized in the devil's name. Thereafter she continued to meet and "run" with the devil and a coven of thirteen other witches on a semi-regular basis. Her confessions provide fulsome descriptions of flying over the countryside, indiscriminately shooting elf or fairy arrows at men, women, and beasts, on the devil's instructions; as well as meeting and feasting with the king and queen of the fairies at Downie-hill. Isobel also placed considerable emphasis on the practice of ritual magic, performed, again in the devil's name, for a variety of maleficent ends. Most significantly, however, Isobel's confessions link the fairy and demonic realms with unrivaled detail, offering a unique glimpse into the complex matrix of "high" and "low" beliefs in this pivotal period. It is an examination of this "interweaving" of popular fairylore and elite demonology that drives this provocative, well-researched study.

This is the first book-length examination of Isobel's trial, and scholars owe a debt to Emma Wilby for her insightful and in-depth examination of several key figures who played a vital role not only in this trial, but also, it is argued, in shaping and recording Isobel's confessions. Wilby's treatment of the notary John Innes, for instance, provides an important reminder of the difference a skilled clerk could make in the character and quality of the trial documents on which all histories of this kind are based. This general point is not totally novel, but it is still one that deserves much wider recognition and consideration, espe-

cially, Wilby persuasively argues, where Innes is concerned. Were it not for Innes's scrupulousness and literary skill the wealth of vivid details that characterize Isobel's confessions would not have been preserved. The discussions of the ministers Hugh Rose and Harry Forbes are similarly valuable. Both Rose and Forbes were responsible for investigating the charges against Isobel, but, what is more, Wilby contends, they both also possessed decidedly curious minds eager to explore the great mysteries in religion and the secrets of nature. Their "itchingly curious" temperament ensured that they met Isobel's testimony with creative and engaged questioning, Wilby argues, affording her a "greater-than-average" space in which to articulate her responses (pp. 110, 109). Though not extensive, the treatment of Rose and Forbes should be of interest to scholars of the broader intellectual and religious developments of the "early Enlightenment," which gave the late seventeenth-century theological and natural philosophical debates surrounding witchcraft and the occult their vitality and urgency. Wilby's discussion here overlaps with other recent works, such as Michael Hunter's ***The Occult Laboratory*** (2001), and suggests that there may be more to the story of Scotland's domestic theological and intellectual motivations to explore the mysterious operations of the natural, spiritual, and occult worlds than is sometimes acknowledged. Certainly, this is an area ripe for further research.

Wilby, for her part, pursues some fruitful lines of inquiry by singularly concentrating on the case of Isobel. Isobel's was anything but a typical Scottish witch trial, and as a microhistory of an aberrant and unusual case, this book owes much to such classic microhistories as Carlo Ginzburg's ***The Cheese and the Worms*** (1976) and Natalie Zemon Davis's ***The Return of Martin Guerre*** (1983). The author sees in the very particularities of Isobel's case an opportunity to better understand and define a latent culture and tradition visible only through scattered, fragmentary, and easily distorted or marginalized documents. Influenced by the work of Ginzburg, Éva Pócs, and Gábor Klaniczay, as well as building on the approach of her first book, ***Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits*** (2005), Wilby uses Isobel's confessions as a window into the possible role shamanistic beliefs and practices, and visionary folkloric traditions played in seventeenth-century Scotland. Largely as a result of the polarizing effect of Ginzburg's work on the agrarian cult of the ***benandanti***, "Good Walkers" (***The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*** [1966; English translation, 1983], and its followup study, ***Ecstasies*** (1989), the "shamanistic paradigm," as Wilby calls it, has been heavily resisted and criticized because its supposedly pan-European, pre-Christian origins seem so improbable, and its internalized, subjective nature leaves behind little or no evidence (prompting many historians to simply turn in other more tangible directions). Keenly aware of these challenges, Wilby is eager to reopen debate, and believes she has found in early modern Scottish fairy beliefs generally, and Isobel's case specifically, a unique justification for doing so.

Starting with the original manuscripts of Isobel's confessions (believed to have been lost for nearly two hundred years and recovered by the author in the National Archives of Scotland in an un-catalogued box that once belonged to John Hay), Wilby carries out a detailed examination of Isobel's testimony and shows how she may have actively practiced harmful ritual magic and performed real acts of ***maleficium***. With this in mind, the author then draws on a range of studies of early modern religion, witchcraft, and magic, alongside nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropological work on shamanism in Asia, Africa, and especially South America. Noting anthropologists' tendency to romanticize and celebrate the ostensibly superior intellect and integrity of shaman, Wilby concentrates on a body of anthropological scholarship concerned primarily with "dark" shamanism. These studies emphasize its aggressive violent dimensions, and explore the

importance of "assault sorcery," "ritual predation," and "ecstatic violence" to shamanic practices (pp. 324, 331). Using this wider theoretical framework, Wilby argues that Isobel may have answered some sort of "calling" or simply identified as a shaman who practiced sometimes harmful ritual magic and communicated with spirits and fairies through visions and dreams. This plays off of Pócs's arguments that in the Western European witch trials the emphasis on the demonic pact may have somehow been informed by the notion of shamanistic helping spirits.[1] To the author, however, research into Scottish fairy belief "suggests that Pócs is unnecessarily cautious" on this point (p. 428). Certainly, Isobel's confessions contain long lists of spirits with fairy-like characteristics, leading Wilby to suggest that she may have been some kind of fairy shaman who actively solicited contact with the fairy spirits. In other words, the author argues that when giving her confessions Isobel was not only drawing on real life physical events and folklore, but possibly also on prior shamanistic experiences. However, under the pressure of repeated interrogation, and the effects of abuse, sleep deprivation, and, perhaps, false-memory generation, these visionary experiences were translated as a confession of a diabolical compact, active and ongoing association with other witches, and indiscriminate maleficence. But a fundamental ambiguity remains at the heart of this process of translation. The dilemma is whether Isobel saw the spirits as fairies or diabolical entities, but Wilby argues it may be more useful and accurate to imagine them as a sort of permanent duality, a conjoining of two possibilities. This is precisely the sort of ambiguity that energized the work of Ginzburg, Pócs, and others, and for which they have been castigated by their critics. On this score, Wilby will undoubtedly have her critics as well.

The argument that Isobel may have actually performed harmful ritual magic and real acts of ***maleficium*** is totally contrary to orthodox thinking on the subject, which tends to see it as something that was attributed to certain individuals, rather than something that was actually performed. This view has precluded the need to explore the therapeutic benefits that may have attended its performance. "Like any ritual," the author writes, "the verbal and physical components of ***maleficium***-performance would have given the practitioner immediate emotional relief, as would the attribution of any misfortune later befalling the victim" (p. 195). It is similarly possible, Wilby continues, that the satisfying sense of resolution that followed (that is, of having restored some sort of moral balance) may even have worked, much like witchcraft accusations and prosecutions, as a sort of social safety valve that helped maintain the stability of early modern village society.

What is more, Wilby suggests that the stereotypical notion that maleficent magic was practiced by women at the middle-to-lower end of the social spectrum may have originally developed simply because it was true. Of course, there is no doubt that the fear these beliefs inspired resulted in terrible abuses and injustices. But, the author argues, to assume that there was nothing real at the root of these fears, that for three hundred years Europe was fixated on the identification and elimination of an entirely imaginary crime, is a hasty and rather condescending presumption. The rate of incidence of actual ***maleficium***-performance would not have needed to be high to feed the fears and anxieties driving the early modern witch hunts. The fear of perceived ***maleficium***-performance undoubtedly exceeded actual performance, and for every bone fide case there were many more false ones. The essential point, Wilby argues, is that the often frantic hype that coalesced around demonological witchcraft may have been gathering around something that was essentially "real" (chapter 8). The same line of reasoning, it is argued, applies to the incidence of dark shamanistic practices. Witch prosecutors, such as Forbes and Rose, then, may not have been tilting at windmills. Of course, during the witch

hunts, many hundreds were falsely condemned for witchcraft and their allegiance to the devil. Nevertheless, Wilby argues, "an unknown minority, with perhaps Isobel Gowdie among them, may have genuinely sought to revenge themselves on their neighbors, ministers and landlords, through an alliance with an envisioned spirit they consciously identified as the Prince of Darkness himself" (p. 489). This is an important and provocative point, one that converges with the findings of some recent research into the history of early modern irreligion and religious intolerance. Much like the fears around notions of "atheism" and "anti-popery," demonology can be seen to have involved a mixture of "real" as well as exaggerated or outright "fictitious" components. Wilby would surely agree with Michael Hunter's conclusion that although in each case it would be unwise to take such contemporary beliefs at face value, it would be equally mistaken to dismiss them all together.[2]

It should be said that this study is not without significant drawbacks. Firstly, this is a long, dense book that unfortunately feels like it in places. While certainly capable of nice turns of phrase, Wilby's writing is often prolix and formulaic. There are also a range of methodological problems, many readily acknowledged throughout by the author. The most conspicuous of these arises from the "unavoidable tensions" created by Wilby's constant switching from "micro-study" to "macro-study" in an effort to tease generalized conclusions from a single witchcraft case (p. 5). This is a tension only heightened by the fact that there is no supporting legal documentation for Isobel's trial, leaving Wilby only with her confessions, which, despite their rich detail, are only a few pieces of a large, complex puzzle. In an effort to fill the gaps, Wilby draws on a range of modern anthropological and psychological studies. Leaving aside the significant anachronistic potential of this approach, it often has the opposite effect, serving only to highlight the lack of direct evidence.

Yet, as important as these criticisms are, there is no need to dwell on them as they are readily apparent (to reader and author alike), and to do so would really only display a rather churlish disregard for the exploratory spirit of this book. Given its complexity, and the many crossroads and decisions that had to be made along the way, "the route taken," the author acknowledges, "has necessarily been a personal one" (p. 538). In other words, this is only one possible interpretation among many. This book gives us much to think about, renewing some old debates and setting up new ones.

Notes

[1]. Éva Pócs, "The Popular Foundations of the Witches' Sabbath and the Devil's Pact in Central and Southeastern Europe," *Acta Ethnographica* 37 (1992): 350.

[2]. Michael Hunter, "The Problem of 'Atheism' in Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 35 (1985): 156-157.

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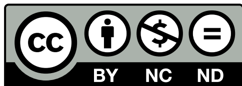

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