



Witches of Fife: Witch-hunting in a Scottish Shire, 1560-1710

Stuart MacDonald

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Along the coast of Fife, in villages like Culross and Pittenweem, historical markers and pamphlets now include the fact that some women were executed as witches within these burghs. Still the reality of what happened the night that Janet Cornfoot was lynched in the harbour is hard to grasp as one sits in the harbour of Pittenweem watching the fishing boats unload their catch and the pleasure boats rising with the tide. How could people do this to an old woman? Why was no-one ever brought to justice? And why would anyone defend such a lynching? The task of the historian is to try to make events in the past come alive and seem less strange. This is particularly true in the case of the historian dealing with the witch-hunt. The details are fascinating. Some of the anecdotes are strange. The modern reader finds it hard to imagine illness being blamed on the malevolence of a beggar woman denied charity. It is difficult to understand the economic failure of a sea voyage being attributed to the village hag, not bad weather. Witch-hunting was related to ideas, values, attitudes and political events. It was a complicated process, involving religious and civil authorities, village tensions and the fears of the elite. The witch-hunt in Scotland also took place at a time when one of the main agendas was the creation of a righteous or godly society. As a result, religious authorities had control over aspects of the lives of the people which seem every bit as strange to us today as might any beliefs about magic or witchcraft. That the witch-hunt in Scotland, and specifically in Fife, should have happened at this time was not accidental. This book tells the story of what occurred over a period of a century and a half, and offers some explanation as to why it occurred.

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