“Creative” Micro Histories, Difficult Heritage, and “Dark” Public History: The Islandmagee Witches (1711) Project

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**Abstract**

This article charts a decade-long project on the trial of the Islandmagee witches in County Antrim (Northern Ireland) in 1711. The project comprised three overlapping and connected phases that negotiated a pathway between researching the history of the trial, its interpretative representation in public discourse, and finding impactful ways to bring this research to wider audiences. It demonstrates that creatively and carefully pitched, microhistories of specific trials can fruitfully add to key historiographical debates in witchcraft studies but when combined with sustained, targeted dissemination and co-produced and collaborative public history, it can open up hidden, but important parts of cultural history and dark heritage to wider audiences. This is especially important in countries such as Northern Ireland that have largely overlooked their witch hunting past and where public remembrance and commemoration of witch trials can be difficult and provoke controversy.

**Keywords:** public history, dark heritage, difficult heritage, Ireland, microhistory, Islandmagee witches

In late February 1711, Ann Haltridge, the elderly widow of Islandmagee Presbyterian minister Rev. John Haltridge, died suddenly of stabbing pains in her back after suffering months of supernatural attacks by a demonic presence in Knowehead House, the home she shared with her son James, his wife, and their two children. Islandmagee is an eight-mile-long peninsula that lies on the east coast of County Antrim in Northern Ireland. In 1711, it was home to around 300 people of Scottish birth or ancestry. After Ann’s funeral, her eighteen-year-old niece, Mary Dunbar, arrived at Knowehead House from nearby Castlereagh, County Antrim, to keep the family company. Dunbar was a member of the lower gentry, well educated and versed in the Bible, and according to contemporary, male commentators, physically attractive. After only a few hours in the house, Dunbar found an apron tightly bound and tied with five knots which had recently and mysteriously appeared on the parlour floor. Various members of the family refused to touch it as they feared it was bewitched. Mary Dunbar displayed none of these misgivings and when she unravelled and untied the apron she found a missing, flannel cap that belonged to the late Mrs Haltridge. Almost immediately, Knowehead House was wracked by supernatural disturbance: the house was hit with stones thrown by unseen hands and objects seemingly moved around the house on their own accord. More importantly, Dunbar began to display the classic symptoms of demonic possession, including vomiting household objects, fits, convulsions, and levitation.During the next month, March 1711, Dunbar accused eight local, Presbyterian women of using witchcraft to attack her in spectral form and to summon demons to possess her body.[[1]](#endnote-1) On the basis of this accusation, the women were found and examined by Justice of the Peace and Anglican-Whig, Mayor of nearby Carrickfergus, Edward Clements, his constables, and local clergy. Having failed a number of ordeals designed to test their guilt, including the ability to say the Lord’s Prayer flawlessly, and to enter a room inhabited by Mary Dunbar without causing her to fit or convulse, they were imprisoned in the jail adjoining Carrickfergus courthouse to await trial. The women were tried on 31 March 1711 at the spring session of Carrickfergus County Assize court, and despite pleading not guilty, all eight women were convicted of witchcraft under the 1586 Irish Act and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment and four stints in the pillory on market day. The incarceration of the convicted women did not lead to an improvement in Dunbar’s health, which was expected in cases of demonic possession and witchcraft in Ireland at that time. Dunbar blamed her prolonged illness on William Sellor, husband to Janet Liston and father to Elizabeth Sellor, two of the eight women convicted at the previous Assizes. She claimed that William Sellor had followed the example of his family members and was now using magic to attack her and the Haltridge household. After resisting arrest and trying to abscond, Sellor was charged and later found guilty of Dunbar’s bewitchment at the summer session of Carrickfergus Assizes on 11 September 1711. Dunbar, however died suddenly three weeks after the first trial but before the trial of William Sellor. As a result, Sellor’s original crime of harming by magical means would have become a capital offence for which execution was the statutory punishment. It is thus highly probable that he was put to death shortly after his conviction. The trials of the Islandmagee witches were the last of Ireland’s four documented witch trials held under the 1586 Act. Ireland was one of the peripheral countries in Europe that escaped the worst ravages of the witch hunting that claimed around 50,000 lives between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Sneddon 2013; 2019: 251–70).

This article argues that academic historians are able, and indeed well placed, to be creative in the way their research is conducted, structured, and presented in order to aid dissemination and create opportunities for wider cultural engagement with the history of early modern witchcraft trials. This point is made through a discussion, divided into three sections, of my decade-long study of trial of the Islandmagee Witches. It suggests that by taking methodological approaches that engage with microhistory, memory studies, oral tradition and folklore, scholarly work can be at once accessible and impact upon wider historiographical debates in witchcraft studies. Furthermore, by traversing the borders of traditional historical periodization that divides the early modern from the modern, micro studies such as this are more able to provide a nuanced and in-depth analysis of change over time with regard to supernatural belief and magical mentalities. The Islandmagee Witches Project comprised three overlapping and connected phases. The first phase was dedicated to researching and writing an accessible but historiographically aware microhistory of the trial. The second phase examined representations of the trial in public discourse, history, and folklore, as well as how it was remembered in the peninsula of Islandmagee between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The final part engaged in the dissemination of historical research to diverse audiences as well as co-produced and collaborative public history, by helping individuals, groups, and organizations to create their own narratives and interpretative frameworks. This part of the project revealed that there was an untapped wealth of public interest in the Islandmagee witches in Northern Ireland, which was linked to widespread interest in, and demand for, “dark heritage.” “Dark tourism” is the phenomenon of visiting landscapes and sites or commemorating events linked to death, suffering, and atrocities. The cultural heritage associated with these sites, landscapes, or events is known as dark heritage, or alternatively as atrocity heritage or dissonant heritage (Murtagh, Boland, Shirlow 2017; Biran, Poria, Oren 2011: 820–24; Dimitrovski et al. 2017; Stupart 2012: 45). This project also demonstrated that historic witch trials in present-day, post-conflict but divided Northern Ireland constitute “difficult heritage,” which occurs when “a past is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested” (Macdonald 2009: 1).

<1>Writing the History of the Islandmagee Witches

On 30 March 2011, I released, via Ulster University, a short statement to the press detailing my ongoing research on Irish witchcraft and pointing out that the next day would mark the 300th anniversary of the trial of (most of) the Islandmagee witches; a fact that had by-passed the mainstream media.[[2]](#endnote-2) The press release had an immediate impact, opening a floodgate of interest at home and abroad: online, on social media, in national and local newspapers,[[3]](#endnote-3) and on local and national radio and television.[[4]](#endnote-4) This level of public interest in the trial had not been matched by academics. The last academic summary of Irish witchcraft and demonology had been published in 1913 (Seymour 1913), and recent academic engagement was limited to two articles explaining the lack of witch trials in Ireland (Gillespie 1991: 44–48; Lapoint 1992) and a case study, from a feminist perspective, of a trial in County Cork in 1661 (McAuliffe 2009). Similarly, works of synthesis detailing current scholarship on early modern, European witch hunts either did not mention Ireland, or did so only very briefly.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This public response convinced me to write a book-length treatment of the trial (*Possessed by the Devil*, Sneddon 2013).[[6]](#endnote-6) The book was thus, from its inception, rooted in public facing history. It was designed to appeal to multiple audiences by being accessible, engaging, and readable but without sacrificing the “archival explorations and fact-driven narratives” associated with academic rigor in historical writing (Bickers et al. 2020: 282). The book took advantage of the fact that the 1711 trials were unusually well documented in terms of surviving primary source material, in comparison to many early modern witchcraft trials in Britain and continental Europe. This material included contemporary newspaper reports;[[7]](#endnote-7) pre-trial depositions;[[8]](#endnote-8) letters written by eyewitnesses detailing the day of the trial;[[9]](#endnote-9) and a thirty-two-page pamphlet written in 1711 but not transcribed and published until 1822 by local historian of Carrickfergus, Samuel McSkimin (Anonymous [1711] 1822). Secondly, complex ideas and theories were explained in straightforward, jargon-free language, and references were detailed in endnotes and largely restricted to primary source material. Secondary source material was discussed in an extended, annotated bibliography. More importantly, it was structured as a narrative rather than thematically arranged, and an emphasis was laid on place and people. Its narrative structure was designed to mirror that of a good documentary made for television, with explication and contextualization of the trial woven in and out of the storytelling. It was, however, distinct from the type of popular histories that, from the 1960s onward, provided narrative accounts of famous Irish witchcraft cases. These histories often conflated cases of witchcraft with those involving cunning folk, conjuration, changeling fairy abduction, and lacked referencing, or wider historical contextualization (Sneddon, forthcoming). This distinction made between *Possessed by the Devil* and earlier, popular histories was not conceived as a type of “boundary-policing by historians, journalists, and cultural commentators around the borders of ‘popular’ and ‘academic’ history, creative non-fiction, and historical fiction”. This “policing” is often the consequence of “unease and anxiety” with “the explicit language and methods of creativity” used by writers and artists (Bickers et al. 2020: 273). Rather the choice of structure, content, pace, and writing style in *Possessed by the Devil* formed an integral part of a creative process that aimed to meet specific intellectual objectives *and* target wider audiences. It is important to “recognize historical work as innately creative” and that “creativity informs the questions we ask, our ways of working with the archive and our approach to writing” (Bickers et al. 2020: 282).

*Possessed by the Devil* was also conceived as microhistory, in that it reduced the scale of observation of the history of belief in witchcraft and the prosecutions of witches in Ireland to a single trial; was based on a focused and intensive study of documentary materials; and used narrative as an analytical tool to explore the lives and the physical and mental environments of the individuals involved. In common with many microhistories, the individuals under scrutiny were “ordinary” in that they were nonelites. However, they can also be regarded as exceptional rather than typical of their time because they had fallen foul of the authorities; otherwise, there would not have been a documentary trail for me to follow.[[10]](#endnote-10) Microhistories are acknowledged by historians as being particularly good at allowing an examination of “the extent of and the limits upon human agency” and in demonstrating the freedoms individuals may have beyond constraining, normative and prescriptive systems (Hammett, Harrison, and King 2020: 250). This was certainly the case in the present study, which uncovered the agency and resistance shown by the convicted witches in their everyday lives and in response to witchcraft accusations laid against them; an aspect of the case that section two will show was often glossed over in nineteenth and twentieth-century representations.

The book’s “close-up” shot of Irish witchcraft informed, and to a certain extent problematized, recent “long-shot” examinations of Irish witchcraft at a national level among both the majority Roman Catholic, Gaelic-Irish population and minority Protestant, settler communities (Hutton 2011; Sneddon 2012). It revealed that there was at least one prosecution of a man for witchcraft in Ireland, and that witchcraft prosecution was often highly politicized. The Islandmagee witch trial was used as an oppositional tool in a period and a place, northeast Antrim, of heightened political tensions between people affiliated to, or committed supporters of, the Whig and Tory parties (Sneddon 2013: 153–71). This microhistory of the trial also linked the symptoms of possession, behavior, and motivations of the demoniac at the center of the case, Mary Dunbar, to witchcraft/demonic possession cases in later sixteenth and seventeenth-century England and in later seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Calvinist Scotland. In common with many demoniacs in these areas, demonic possession allowed Dunbar to challenge constraints on her behavior without consequence: she was able to endanger and verbally abuse her elders without fear of retribution and to put herself in sexually comprising positions without damaging her reputation as a member of the lower gentry and part of a respectable clerical family. In doing so, she became the chief performer in a demonic drama of her own creation, which was based on a well-established cultural script of possession that she augmented as she went along in reaction to an audience comprising members of local law enforcement, family members, and neighbors.[[11]](#endnote-11) In stark contrast, the women Dunbar accused of orchestrating her possession were regarded as “believable witches” and threatening women by their neighbors and clerical and legal authorities because of their agency, acts of resistance, and general failure to meet patriarchal standards of womanhood. Their poverty, physical appearance, behavior, and bad reputations set them apart from their neighbors in Islandmagee and surrounding towns and villages and made them the type of women thought likely to be in the devil’s service: they were variously physically impaired or facially scarred by burns or small-pox marks; they were poor and dressed shabbily; they smoked tobacco and drank strong alcohol; and some had reputations for unneighborly conduct. Some of them also resisted arrest or refused to co-operate with investigating constables and the clergy and magistrates who interrogated them. Furthermore, all of the women plead not guilty on the day of the trial in a courtroom packed with local elites convinced of their guilt, including their ministers and landlords. William Sellor also fell considerably short of the patriarchal ideal of a good husband, father, or upstanding male member of a godly community: rather than being in control of his own body, he drank alcohol to excess; he resisted authority by trying to abscond when he was about to be arrested; and rather than controlling the family he headed, he had allowed his daughter and wife to be ensnared by the devil.[[12]](#endnote-12)

<1>Remembering and Representing the Islandmagee Witches

The second phase of the project examined how historic witch trials were remembered and represented in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland through a microhistory of the trial of the Islandmagee witches. This part of the project was conducted in the context of recent research that demonstrated belief in witchcraft continued in Ireland at a popular level, all over the country, in both Catholic and Protestant communities, up until at least the twentieth century. Furthermore, this belief represented an amalgam of older Gaelic-Irish witchcraft notions and the newer malefic, demonic witchcraft of Protestant settlers. By the nineteenth century, the two traditions merged together in the popular culture of the working classes, and although not particularly demonic, the witch figure had become much more threatening to humans, livestock, and agricultural produce than in the early modern period (Sneddon 2015: 94–123). It formed part of a growing historiography that challenged the orthodoxy of a disenchanted modernity in Britain, continental Europe, and North America by tracing the contours of continued belief among ordinary people, uncovering and analyzing the (often violent) private (as opposed to state) action taken against suspected witches. It also explored how continuing belief in witchcraft at home and abroad was represented by elites in public discourse and how historic, early modern witchcraft trials were culturally represented and memorialized.[[13]](#endnote-13) The term “witch trial in reverse” describes criminal proceedings where suspected witches prosecuted their accusers, usually the bewitched party or their relatives, for assault. Owen Davies established a methodology by which these trials could be explored by locating English reverse witch trials in nineteenth-century newspaper court reports and followed them up in surviving court, census, prison, and coroner records.[[14]](#endnote-14) Adapted to an Irish context, this methodology was used to analyze not only witch trials in reverse but all criminal cases, from slander to theft to taking money under false pretenses, heard between 1822 and 1922 that involved an accusation of witchcraft. These cases had been variously brought before police courts and petty sessions, and less frequently before higher criminal courts such as the Quarter Sessions and county Assizes, all over Ireland, from Cork to Antrim. This study also revealed that accused witches (often helped by relatives) fought their accusers using laws prohibiting slander and assault and with harsh words, fists, firearms and knives; actions which, unsurprisingly, landed them on the wrong side of the law (Sneddon and Fulton 2019).

This microhistory of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islandmagee also produced a slightly different picture of Irish witchcraft by showing that the way people living there collectively remembered the Islandmagee witches through oral tradition and folk commemoration, ways that also shaped and reinforced their continued belief in witchcraft (Sneddon 2019: 255–58). Historians have increasingly regarded oral tradition as an important way in which knowledge about the past and historical events are transmitted through successive generations. Folk commemoration is intimately related to this orally preserved historical tradition and is the process by which the landscape is embedded with historical meaning and thus acts as a powerful device for remembrance for local communities (Beiner 2007: 8, 18, 19–20, 200–209). Social memory is defined as a process of remembrance that provides members of a community with interpretative frameworks through which to view their past, whether in relation to personal or to shared recollection. This remembered past is a sociocultural interpretative construction that can be built either from fabricated or authentic sources.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Folklore, oral histories, memoirs, early local histories, and newspaper reports from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrated how the story of the 1711 trial was passed down through the generations of Islandmagee inhabitants, especially within families of the descendants of trial witnesses, accusers, and the accused witches. This folk history of the trial nurtured continuing belief in the area in the power of witchcraft by providing what people regarded as historical evidence that witches and witchcraft were real and not only *had* harmed but could *still* harm humans, animals, and agricultural produce. In the later nineteenth and twentieth century, places associated in oral tradition with the Islandmagee witches reminded the unwary of the lingering, supernatural evil of the convicted women. Knowehead House where old Mrs Haltridge had died and Mary Dunbar had become possessed was studiously avoided at night by the locals, including those perceived to be of a higher social class and educational level (Sneddon 2019: 255–57). The number of largely Protestant residents in Islandmagee rose nearly tenfold between 1711 and 1821, from 300 to 2,990. Islandmagee contained only a few members of the gentry and aristocracy and almost no legal or medical professionals. The majority of its population were employed in skilled or semi-skilled labor, and included small-holding farmers, craftsmen, fishermen, and agricultural laborers. Although elementary schooling was available to all Islandmagee children, irrespective of social class, from the later seventeenth-century onward, educational and literacy rates among the poor remained low until the intervention, in the later nineteenth century, of the National School System (Akenson 1979: 31–170; Donaldson [1927] 2002: 55–58). Knowehead House’s association with the uncanny was sealed by the circulation of tales of nearby ghost and spirit sightings. Local oral tradition also warned of the need to avoid at night another local landmark associated with the Islandmagee witches, the “Rocking Stone” situated near Brown’s Bay in Islandmagee. Tales of sightings of the Islandmagee witches dancing on it at night merged with stories that the deep grooves buried into its surface were in actuality claw-marks left by one of the convicted women, Catherine McCalmond, when she was dragged off to court to stand trial (Sneddon 2019: 257). Divest of such supernatural association, the “Rocking Stone” was a popular subject matter in the nineteenth and early twentieth century for artists and photographers,[[16]](#endnote-16) and it even featured on a postcard (Fig.1). It was thus shrouded in mystery in local oral tradition and a fearful part of the local nightscape, but by day it was commodified and sold to tourists increasingly flocking to the area by train from Belfast to enjoy Brown’s Bay and the Gobbins cliffs.[[17]](#endnote-17)

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Stories of the Islandmagee witches were not only created and transmitted in local culture but were also committed to paper by journalists, travel writers, historians, and antiquarians from the late eighteenth century onward. Together their work revealed the ideological uses to which historic witchcraft trials in Ireland were put (Sneddon 2019: 261–63). In contrast to the mass of the population, and echoing trends of Irish elites, from the professional middle classes to the gentry, from the mid-eighteenth century onward, most modern Irish commentators professed (publicly, in print) to disbelieve in witchcraft. Witchcraft and witch trials were regarded as belonging to a previous age of irrationality, popular ignorance, and religious zeal; an era they believed contrasted sharply with present-day modernity with its hallmarks of rationality, scientific endeavor, and progress brought forth by the Enlightenment (Sneddon 2015: 94–123). Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journalists and historians used the Islandmagee witch to bolster this narrative of Irish witchcraft, which at once questioned its reality while distancing Ireland from the legacy of early modern-European witch hunting. In Irish provincial newspapers, no matter the editorial line taken, the Islandmagee case itself was explained away in enlightenment terms as an exceptional lapse of the Irish into the irrationality, zealotry, and ignorance that drove witch hunts elsewhere in early modern Europe. This consensus is surprising given that Irish newspapers were increasingly polarized across unionist and nationalist lines, often catering for either a Protestant and unionist or a Catholic and nationalist readership. Irish newspaper coverage of the 1711 trial also tended to emphasize the innocence, piety, and frailty of the female Islandmagee witches, in the face of insurmountable societal forces. Some placed their sufferings in the context of persecution by the Church and state, and by the mid-twentieth century it was regarded as the product of professionally minded male doctors rooting out troublesome women who threatened their medical practice. More importantly, from the early nineteenth century onward, all discourse excluded William Sellor, the only male Islandmagee witch, from their narratives. It is impossible to state with certainty why Sellor was excluded. It could be that the more he was excluded, the more he was lost to historians and journalists. However, his exclusion also served the ideological concerns of some commentators, in that male witches challenged the gender stereotype they wished to promulgate: that witches and witchcraft were exclusively female. As this treatment of William Sellor suggests, cultural representations in this period were highly gendered. They also deprived women of the agency (described above) they demonstrated in their everyday lives against the restrictions of normative femininity and during their prosecution for witchcraft. They were not gentle or weak: they fought back with what limited social or political capital they had in terrible circumstances. The Islandmagee women however were portrayed as worthy of pity because they were pious, innocent, weak, pliant, and helpless in the face of the individuals, institutions, and power structures that were ranged against them (Sneddon 2019: 261–63). This aspect of the Islandmagee witch trials (along with the prosecution of William Sellor) reminds us that although early modern society (including Irish society) was patriarchal and that male privilege was justified in biblical exegesis, expounded in medical theory, codified in law, and a fundamental part of social practice, we need also to take account of women’s agency and resistance and of “men’s varied access to patriarchal privilege, on the basis of age, social status, marital status and ethnic identity” (Shepard 2017: 331).

<1>Public History and the Islandmagee Witches

The third, public-history phase of the project began after the launch of *Possessed by the Devil* in 2013, which was widely reported on Northern Irish radio and in newspapers.[[18]](#endnote-18) This part of the project straddled two different interpretations of public history, between one where it is “based on the form and nature of transmission of historical knowledge to wider audiences” and another where the public participatory element is greater and all parties involved, including professional historians, become agents of historical creation (Kean 2010: 25, 26). Dissemination of my historical research was conducted through talks and public lectures for heritage, educational, and community groups in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. I also responded to requests from writers, directors, and production companies to work with them on movie scripts, radio, and television projects relating to the Islandmagee witches. Both approaches took my historical research to larger audiences, but the latter was inherently collaborative and allowed producers and directors to move beyond dissemination and produce their own creative interpretations. The majority of these projects arose after individuals and groups had read, or at the very least became aware of *Possessed by the Devil*. This impact can be partly explained by the fact that microhistory works particularly well in public history because “there is a strong public interest in the intimate histories of ‘ordinary’ people alongside elites.” This explains why “heritage sites often tell the story of a single family, community, event or trade” (Hammett, Harrison, and King 2020: 250).

In the years after the publication of *Possessed by the Devil*, when asked to talk about the Islandmagee witches, I prioritized events according to their ability to engage with as wide and diverse a public audience as possible. In practice, this meant prioritizing talks and workshops given at community-based events,[[19]](#endnote-19) local libraries,[[20]](#endnote-20) and Women’s Groups[[21]](#endnote-21) over papers presented at academic conferences and seminars.[[22]](#endnote-22) At the former events, the 1711 case was used as a launching point to discuss local history, folklore, and issues affecting present-day Northern Ireland relating to equality, inclusion, division, tolerance, and gender. I also engaged with the arts and heritage sector, including Carrickfergus Museum, situated close to where the women were tried and punished,[[23]](#endnote-23) and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast, where in October 2013 I gave a book reading and talk on the Islandmagee witches. Due to public demand, this event was repeated, filmed, and repackaged as “The History, of the Devil, Magic and Witchcraft” and hosted on their website.[[24]](#endnote-24) Meanwhile, between 2016 and 2019, I collaborated with Adam Turkington of Seedhead Arts in Belfast, which provides arts consultancy, event management and training services in Northern Ireland, to develop new ways of reaching diverse, adult audiences via a Northern Irish Arts venue, the Black Box in Belfast. Together they hosted nine public lectures on the Islandmagee witches and Irish witchcraft to around 1,200 people, and public demand was such that every lecture was sold out, some within a matter of hours. This unexpected public response revealed the extent of public appetite in Ireland for knowledge of the “dark” history of the Islandmagee witches. There is undoubtedly a large market in Ireland for dark heritage and tourism, but this is largely catered for by “brick and mortar” attractions, from prisons and castles to monuments and museums (O’Brien 2020: 6). Gillian O’Brien attributes the allure of dark tourism to the fact that “Irish history is full of darkness, and perhaps it’s this history that encourages a fascination with the morbid, the melancholic, the miserable, the maudlin (so many ‘M’ words)” (O’Brien 2020: 6). However, she also locates this fascination in Irish culture and the national psyche: “The Irish do have a perverse attraction to nurturing their injuries. We don’t need to have experienced terrible events, we just need to have heard about them to have absorbed some of the outrage from the past … And it’s certainly true, as Professor Liam Kennedy has written, that ‘the motif of victimhood bulks large in Irish national self-consciousness’ … And though we’re not the Most Oppressed People Ever, much of the history of Ireland is indeed traumatic … Irish history is an open wound, an object of veneration, proudly on display to all comers” (O’Brien 2020: 7).

O’Brien has also noted that the supernatural stories and tales attached to heritage sites hold a special attraction for tourists: “[G]hosts are big business in contemporary Ireland, whether we believe in them or not. There’s not a castle that hasn’t a Knight haunting its ramparts … or a ghost in the dungeons rattling their chains” (O’Brien 2020: 302). These hauntings are often linked to tragic events and/or deaths said to have occurred on-site in the past. For example, the “White Lady” said to haunt the northeastern tower of Dunluce Castle in County Antrim is Maeve McQuillan, the only daughter of Lord McQuillan. Maeve is said to have drowned in the sea surrounding the castle while trying to elope with a man that her father disapproved of.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Between 2013 and 2021, along with hosting workshops and talks, I worked as consultant and contributor on a number of radio programs dedicated to the trial.[[26]](#endnote-26) I also collaborated with production companies to “pitch” films and television programs to various funders and broadcasters. These collaborations, in common with the public talks, were on nearly every occasion made after producers, screenwriters, or directors had read *Possessed by the Devil* or one of my other articles. Production companies often told me that because the narrative element was so strong in the book, and because it was already structured like a documentary, it could be effectively and easily adapted for television. Its design, as creative microhistory, thus not only brought it to the attention of the media, it made the process of adapting it for wider consumption easier. Due to the limited funding available, and the competitive nature of tendering processes, most of the pitches were unsuccessful. Some collaborations did however bear fruit and led to consultancy and on-screen contributions to productions for broadcasters in Britain, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. These programs were variously targeted at Ulster Scots and at English and Irish speakers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (and further afield) and were often the first time the producer or broadcaster concerned had tackled the issue of Irish witchcraft. In this way, broadcasters were able to capture new and culturally and linguistically diverse audiences with their own interpretation of a story that was essentially about a Scots Presbyterian community living in Ulster.[[27]](#endnote-27) In practice, along with on-screen appearances, the collaborations involved ensuring the historical accuracy of scripts, identifying shooting locations, and locating and interpreting original documents to be used on-screen and by researchers and directors. Consequently, a balance was struck between the need to produce entertaining and interesting television and historical accuracy and interpretation based on primary evidence. One of the largest and last projects I worked on tipped the balance further in favor of co-production and collaboration in that my historical research inspired others to produce their own creative interpretations (Hammett, Harrison, and King 2020: 250–51). Between 2016 and 2021, I worked with Lagan Media Productions on the production of a six-part, Irish-language series to provide a new, nuanced, and broad (in terms of chronology and themes covered) examination of Irish witchcraft. I was closely involved in this series, from “pitch” to “post-production,” and many of the episodes were directly based on my research and publications, including those on the trial Islandmagee witches and the extra-judicial killing of a witch in Antrim town, County Antrim in 1698.[[28]](#endnote-28) The series, however, also reflects the creative input of producers and developers, providing a feminist interpretation of witch trials in Ireland and placing them in the wider context of ancient, Gaelic-Irish cosmology, mythology, and folklore. The website for the series describes the program thus: “Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, were persecuted in the witch hunts in Europe and America in the early modern period. Yet witch trials were rare in Ireland, a culture where ancient beliefs in powerful female archetypes remained. This series explores witchcraft accusations in Ireland, the religious beliefs and social conditions that underpinned them, and how a native cosmology may have protected the Irish from the horror of the witch hunts.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

Despite public interest in the trial, and the fact that it had been commemorated informally for centuries in the local area, it has yet (as of October 2021) to be officially commemorated or memorialized in Northern Ireland: there is no museum exhibition or memorial or signage dedicated to the Islandmagee witches. The plaque at the base of the modern imagining of the pillory in Carrickfergus, placed near to where the women were tried and pilloried, does not mention the Islandmagee witches. However, unofficially in online guides, it has recently been referred to as “Carrickfergus Witches’ Pillory.”[[30]](#endnote-30) The situation in Northern Ireland is different to other countries that experienced mass witch trials in that some of those countries have confronted their witch hunting past through pardons, memorials, monuments, and other commemorative activities: in England, in relation to the Lancaster witch trials of 1612; in the United States with regard to the Salem Witch trials of 1692–1693; and in Vardø, Norway, where the Steilneset Memorial commemorates the 91 people executed for witchcraft at a series of trials in the seventeenth century in East Finnmark (Findlay and Oakley-Brown 2014: 1; Tanović 2019: 65–73; Sneddon 2019: 258–59). Indeed, some sectors of Northern Irish society have found the notion of commemorating convicted witches extremely problematic, and as such it can be considered difficult heritage. In February 2015, wide media coverage was given to objections by Traditional Unionist Voice Councillor, the late Jack McKee, to a proposal made to Larne Council by novelist Martina Devlin to erect a small memorial in Islandmagee to the eight women. This formed part of a wider call by Devlin to have the women posthumously pardoned. William Sellor was not mentioned in either the plan to have the Islandmagee witches pardoned or commemorated. McKee argued that he knew of no evidence that the women had been wrongly convicted and felt that to commemorate the Islandmagee witches, would be “anti-God” and that “he was not going to support devil worship.”[[31]](#endnote-31) By referring to McKee as “a born-again Christian councillor,” the *Guardian* newspaper in February 2021 hinted that his objection was rooted in his religious ideology and membership of the fundamentalist and evangelical Free Presbyterian Church of Ireland, founded in 1951 by Reverend Ian Paisley.[[32]](#endnote-32) McKee’s linking of the Islandmagee trial to “devil worship” however can be traced back to the early 1970s in Northern Ireland during the 30 year period of conflict known euphemistically as “The Troubles.” Due to its historical association with witchcraft, Islandmagee was chosen in 1972 by operatives in Royal Ulster Constabulary’s Special Branch as the location of one of a number of staged black magic sites designed to invoke current concerns over modern Satanism that would keep children off the street at night and away from places of strategic importance such as army bases (Sneddon 2019: 258; Jenkins 2014).

The reluctance to commemorate, pardon or memorialize the Islandmagee witches may also be a consequence of the fact that post-conflict but still religiously, socially, culturally, and politically divided Northern Ireland is particularly sensitive to (and often wary of) secular remembrance and commemoration. This is especially true when it is underpinned by competing religiously and politically informed memories or interpretations of the past that have the potential to create controversy and deepen community or societal divisions.[[33]](#endnote-33) It is for this reason that the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland, along with charities such as the Heritage Lottery Fund and the museum and heritage sector, approached Ireland’s Decade of Centenaries strategically, cautiously, and sensitively as an extremely important but difficult heritage with disruptive potential. The Decade of Centenaries marked events occurring during a period of intense conflict and change, starting with the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912 and passage of the Third Home Rule Bill, encountering the Easter Rising of 1916 and the First World War along the way, and ending with the Irish Civil War and the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921/22.[[34]](#endnote-34) There are however, early indications that attitudes to the Islandmagee trial may be changing within local councils. In May 2015, a reorganization of local government in Northern Ireland saw Larne Borough Council subsumed into the new, larger Mid and East Antrim Council. This new council has recognized the dark-tourism potential of the Islandmagee trial and has included (from 2018) a discussion of the case (based on *Possessed by the Devil*) on their website, “Shaped by Sea & Stone,” which celebrates the history and heritage of mid and east Antrim.[[35]](#endnote-35) I am currently working with curators and local museums in Northern Ireland to design an exhibition dedicated to the trial and how it was later represented in culture. This is in its initial planning stages but will use commissioned works of visual art and soundscapes inspired by the trial, as well as text and objects of material culture to engage the viewer emotionally and allow them to create their own interpretations. In doing so, a collaboration between historians, artists, musicians, and curators, in conjunction with the viewer, will co-produce, perhaps in a more immediate and meaningful way than a published book could, a new creative microhistory. And hopefully in 2061, which will mark the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the trial of the Islandmagee witches, we will see the case attract the same level of official backing, commemoration, and public remembrance and memorialization (without the attendant commodification and commercialization perhaps) afforded to the Salem and Lancaster witch trials.

**Conclusion**

This project demonstrates that microhistory that uses a narrative structure focused on people and place is a particularly good fit with public history projects, especially when care is taken in the planning stages to embrace the creativity inherent in the historical writing process in order to enhance appeal to wider audiences. This can be achieved without relinquishing all scholarly apparatus or historiographical impact. However, even nonnarrative microhistories published in academic journals can be adapted and utilized in public talks, online events, workshops, and radio and television programs. It was important for this project not only to establish the historical reality of the trial through evidence-based research but to historicize the interpretive frameworks through which it has been viewed, in oral tradition and folk commemoration and in printed discourse. The project demonstrated that accessible microhistory can help create new opportunities for the dissemination of academic research and facilitate collaborations aimed at creating new histories and interpretations of Irish witchcraft both within and outside of academia. Although it seems almost too obvious to mention, it is nevertheless worth stating that when disseminating research findings, it is important to venture into the local community and be ready to adapt approaches and presentation style in anticipation of audience expectations. It is impossible to quantify the extent and nature to which cultural awareness of the trial of the Islandmagee witches has been raised in Northern Ireland and further afield in the past decade, or indeed how far my research and public engagement activities were responsible for this change. What is clear is that the extent to which social media, television, radio, and print media now engage with the Islandmagee witches is unrecognizable compared with a decade ago. This engagement has also shown that the commemoration of historic witch trials, in divided communities with contested pasts such as Northern Ireland, represents difficult heritage that has to be handled sensitively and carefully. There is, however, so much more that can be achieved to bring knowledge of the Islandmagee to wider audiences, to memorialize the eight women and one man convicted of witchcraft in 1711, and to tie their story to the landscape and the history of the region. Although the history of witchcraft still has the potential to divide and create controversy, belief in the supernatural is part of a shared Irish history and heritage that has the potential to unite. It is a cultural and historical tie that binds together people of all religious and political backgrounds in Northern Ireland.

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1. The women were: Catherine McCalmond, Janet Liston, Elizabeth Sellor, Janet Carson, Janet Main, Janet Millar, Janet Latimer, and Margaret Mitchell. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See “The Islandmagee Witches 300 Year Anniversary,” last modified 30 March 2011, <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/2011/march/the-islandmagee-witches-y-300-year-anniversary>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For example: *Belfast Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, 31 March 2011; *Irish Independent*, 28 May 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For example: BBC Radio Ulster; RTE, “Morning Show.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Levack 2006: 124; Behringer 2008: 122, 144, 148; Briggs 2002; and Ankarloo and Henningsen 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This research was published as: Sneddon 2015 and Sneddon 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See *Dublin Intelligence*, 14 April 1711 and 24 April 1711. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Ms 883/2: 273–85. These depositions were published in the late nineteenth century as Young 1896. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See TCD, Ms 889, ff.31r–31v; Tisdall (1711) 1775. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For microhistory, see Ginzburg, Tedeschi, and Tedeschi 1993: 22–32; Levi 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Sneddon 2013. See also, Sharpe 1996, Almond 2004: 1–41, and Levack 2007: 115–30, 145–61. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sneddon 2013, chapters 4–6. For a recent study of how early modern English literature linked individuals with physical impairments to evil based on their appearance: Eaton 2020. For male witches and the role masculinity played in witchcraft accusations and trials: Rowlands 2009; Apps and Gow 2003; Millar 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This research includes: Suggett 2008: 128–33, 142–54; Bell 2007; Hutton 2010; Davies 1999, 2013; De Blécourt 1996; Henderson 2016: 312–13; Purkiss 1996: chs. 1–2; Gibson 2007; Barry 2013; Waters 2009, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a discussion of this methodology, Davies 2018: 218–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For social memory, see O’Connell 2014; Beiner 2007: 28; Connerton 1989; Wertsch 2002; Fentress and Wickham 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For example, James Moore, “Rocking Stone, Brown’s Bay, Islandmagee,” 1841, colored drawing, National Museums of Northern Ireland (NMNI); or the photograph of “Four Boys at the Rocking Stone, Islandmagee”, 1879, last accessed 7 April 2021, <https://flashbak.com/great-portraits-of-ireland-and-the-irish-at-the-turn-of-the-19th-century-410697/four-boys-at-the-rocking-stone-at-islandmagee-county-antrim-1870/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For tourism in Islandmagee in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, Akenson 1979: 60–62. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For example, *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 May 2013, “Hubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble … in Islandmagee”; *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 November 2013, ‘Mark Twain’s Ancestor was ‘Witchfinder General’ during Islandmagee Witch Trial.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. For example, “The Islandmagee Witches,” 27 May 2016, Ballyclare May Fair, County Antrim. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For example, “The Witches of Islandmagee,” 14 July 2016, Larne Library, County Antrim, last modified 12 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2WkyeS0oxU>. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For example, Talk and Tours of Islandmagee, County Antrim, Herstory Project, 4 December 2019, Foyle Women’s Information Network, Derry/Londonderry. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For example, “Identity, Place and Representation: Witches and Modernity,” 30 June 2017, Canadian Association for Irish Studies, Annual Conference, June 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For example, “Representing the Islandmagee Witches in ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’” 28 October 2020, Carrickfergus and District Historical Society and Carrickfergus Museum, last modified 16 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2WkyeS0oxU>. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “The History, of the Devil, Magic and Witchcraft,” 25 April 2014, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, last modified 15 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9Bw1xzbrFw>. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. O’Brien 2020: 302–6. For a history of Dunluce Castle: Breen 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For example, BBC Radio Ulster, “A Kist O' Words,” series 33, episode 15, October 2013, last modified 10 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01lmcfy/p01lmc70>; BBC Radio Ulster, “Your Place or Mine,” 25 October 2013, last modified 10 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01kc102>; Radio Ulster, “Your Place or Mine,” 31 October 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For example, BBC1, Ulster Scots Language and Culture program, “The Gaitherin,” October 2014; BBC2 Irish language program, “I Lár Aonaigh,” Below the Radar TV, November 2016; BBC1, “The One Show,” short film on Islandmagee witchcraft trial, October 2016; BBCNI, “Family Footsteps,” series 2, episode 3, November 2019, Wadell Media. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. TG4/BBCNI,“An Diabhal Inti - The Devil’s in Her,*”* Lagan Media, to be broadcast in early 2022. For the killing of an elderly woman in County Antrim in 1698, see Sneddon 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. “An Diabhal Inti - The Devil’s in Her,*”* [*http://paulamkehoe.com/witches-ireland/*](http://paulamkehoe.com/witches-ireland/), last modified 16 November 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/carrickfergus-pillory-last-witchcraft-trial-ireland>, last modified 13 April 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 February 2015, “Unholy Row as Larne Plans Plaque to Mark 1711 Witch Trial.” See also, BBC News, 5 February 2015, “Witches of Islandmagee: Toil and Trouble over Memorial Plans”, last accessed 14 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-31148230>; Sneddon 2019: 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *The Guardian*, 5 February 2015, “Christian Councillor Objects to Islandmagee ‘Witches’ Plaque.” [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Sneddon 2019: 258–59. See also Longley 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. For a discussion of the political and social implications of the Decade of Centenaries in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Bryan et al. 2013; Mullen 2018: 34–48. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. “The Witches of Islandmagee,” <https://shapedbyseaandstone.com/editorials/witches-islandmagee>, last modified 12 April 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)