



Roundtable The Islandmagee Witches 1711 Creative and Digital Project

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Roundtable: *The Islandmagee Witches 1711 Creative and Digital Project*¹

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(Islandmagee Witches 1711 Project)

Frank Ferguson and Stephen Butler
(Ulster University)

Alice McCullough
(Poet)

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Abstract. In March and September of 1711, in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, Ireland's last witch trials took place. Eighteen-year-old educated gentlewoman Mary Dunbar accused eight Presbyterian women and one man from Islandmagee and the surrounding areas of using witchcraft to attack her in spectral or spirit form and to summon demons to possess her body. The women were tried on 31 March 1711 at the Spring Session of Carrickfergus County Assize Court. Despite pleading not guilty, they were convicted under the 1586 Irish Witchcraft Act and sentenced to one year's imprisonment and four stints in the pillory. Unlike most demonically-possessed persons, the incarceration of the convicted witches did not improve Dunbar's health. Dunbar now claimed that William Sellar, husband and father to two of the convicted women, had begun bewitching her. William was convicted of witchcraft at the Summer Assizes in September 1711. Mary Dunbar however had died a few weeks earlier, just after the first trial, turning William's original offence into a capital crime for which he was probably executed: he was thus one of a possible two people executed in Ireland under a witchcraft Act. The story of the trial is told in Andrew Sneddon's book *Possessed by the Devil: The Real History of The Islandmagee Witches and Ireland's Only Mass Witchcraft Trial* (History Press, 2013). Along with Victoria McCollum, Sneddon now heads the *Islandmagee*

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Witches 1711 Project (w1711.org). The following discussion outlines the origins, aims and outputs of the project.

Key Words. Irish Witchcraft Act, trials, County Antrim, Mary Dunbar, *Islandmagee Witches 1711 Project*

Resumen. En marzo y septiembre de 1711 se celebraron en Carrickfergus, condado de Antrim, los últimos juicios por brujería de Irlanda. Mary Dunbar, una joven instruida de dieciocho años, acusó a ocho mujeres presbiterianas y a un hombre de Islandmagee y sus alrededores de utilizar la brujería para atacarla en forma de espectros y espíritus, y de invocar a los demonios para que poseyeran su cuerpo. Las mujeres fueron juzgadas el 31 de marzo de 1711 en la sesión de primavera del Tribunal de Primera Instancia del condado de Carrickfergus. A pesar de declararse inocentes, fueron declaradas culpables en virtud de la Ley irlandesa de Brujería de 1586 y sentenciadas a un año de prisión y cuatro condenas en la picota. A diferencia de la mayoría de los endemoniados, el encarcelamiento de las brujas condenadas no mejoró la salud de Dunbar. Dunbar afirmó entonces que William Sellor, marido y padre de dos de las condenadas, la habría embrujado. William fue condenado por brujería en el juicio de verano de septiembre de 1711. Sin embargo, Mary Dunbar murió unas semanas antes, justo después del primer juicio, lo que convirtió el delito original de William en un crimen capital por el que probablemente fue ejecutado: se trató así de una de las dos personas posiblemente ejecutadas en Irlanda en virtud de la Ley de Brujería. La historia del juicio se relata en el libro de Andrew Sneddon *Possessed by the Devil: The Real History of The Islandmagee Witches and Ireland's Only Mass Witchcraft Trial* (History Press, 2013). Junto con Victoria McCollum, Sneddon dirige ahora el Proyecto *Islandmagee Witches 1711* (w1711.org). A continuación, se exponen los orígenes, objetivos y resultados del proyecto.

Palabras clave. Ley irlandesa de brujería, juicios, Condado de Antrim, Mary Dunbar, proyecto *Islandmagee Witches 1711*

Victoria McCollum: I became aware of Andrew's research when I was doing my PhD at Ulster. The PhD was about how traumatic events find their way into things we consume like film and TV. By this time Andrew's monograph, *Possessed by the Devil*, had come out, I read it and it clamped onto my mind like a rusty mantrap. I found it so accurate and rigorous in detail and it was also so creative for a monograph – and it was really, really scary! Naturally, I jumped at the chance to work with Andrew on this project. We started our collaborative public history project about two years ago. What we wanted to do was to uncover the events of the Islandmagee trial – Ireland's only mass witch trial and the last to be held on Irish soil. We wanted to explore how the events had been represented, how they're remembered, and how folks can derive meaning from being in intimate contact with the past. Soon we began striving to bring cultural heritage which is very much intangible to a wider audience. We were interested in bringing it to a wider audience using both creative and more immersive technologies. That's how the project kicked off. It is truly interdisciplinary, involving history, cinematic arts, interactive media, music, drama, screen production, games, also PhD candidates and students. There's a lot of rich collaboration there.

At the project website (w1711.org), you can engage with the history of the trial in multiple ways. If you're someone that wants to go on and interpret the history for yourself, you can read the transcripts of the original documents and depositions which are really interesting.

You can listen to a very carefully crafted soundscape associated with the Islandmagee witches because, of course, there's particular sounds associated with this story and possession. You can read our dark graphic novel. You can experience on our VR app what it's like to be bewitched and what it's like to be accused of being bewitched. And soon you'll be able to play a demo of our new video game. It's called "Demonised: The Islandmagee Witches" and it's a choice-driven game in which you play the role of a witch hunter in Ireland.

Our latest output was launched in February 2023. *The Witches of Islandmagee* by David Campbell, Victoria McCollum and Andrew Sneddon is a supernatural graphic novel. It's really very scary. It's loaded with haunting visuals and it's that often misty isolated town off the coast of Antrim. In the novel, it's 1711 and a woman with demons of her own has begun a quest to root evil out of her village. The stakes are real, the devil is real and it's a spine-tingling tale of fear and faith set in Northern Ireland. Obviously, it's based on Andrew's very successful monograph, *Possessed by the Devil*, and the Islandmagee witches and Ireland's only mass witch trial. I guess, on reflection, really what we're doing here is exploring how Ireland's dark and difficult heritage can be creatively retold with an ethical impulse.

Andrew Sneddon: I wrote *Possessed By the Devil* as a narrative micro-history that drew upon academic work and theory to tell the story of a marginalised part of Irish social history. To do so I wove story, theory and exposition together – this was hard to do as academic historians hadn't really written about the events before. I took many themes present in this book forward in my next two books, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Palgrave, 2015) and *Representing Magic in Modern History: Belief, History, Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). In the latter I looked at how magic/witchcraft was gendered, politicised, and invested in by both Catholic and Protestants, nationalists and unionists well into the twentieth century, including the story of the Islandmagee witches. As when writing *Possessed by the Devil*, during the project similar authorial dilemmas arose for Victoria and I as to how to maintain disciplinary elements while making the story accessible and relatable, especially to non-academic audiences. All the more difficult when dealing with essentially creative elements.

VMcC: I think it's really important for the project to engage with non-academic audiences with our research. This is especially important considering how marginalised the people at the centre of the project are. So much of this story is culturally intangible and we wanted to shorten the distance between say, an intangible cultural space and visitors interested in engaging with the histories. How can we encourage people to have an empathetic understanding about the witch trials? The AR/VR component of the project, developed in collaboration with Helen Jackson, Sentireal, and Enter Yes, is divided into two parts – you put the headset on, and you're immersed in a Presbyterian meeting hall in Islandmagee. You're sitting there, and you can pick up different film reels and learn the context of the story. You can then exit out the curtain from the left, and suddenly you're at the Old Rocking Stone, which is very significant.

AS: The Rocking Stone was given that name as it would "rock" from side to side if an individual sat on it. It was believed that the witches would dance on it at night and leave claw marks as they did so. People say they've forgotten about the Islandmagee Witches Trial after the 1700s, but stories have been passed down generationally and through families and through landmarks. It is remembered in folklore and tradition and people also remember through the landscape – the Rocking Stone as an example. In VR, that's the factual element – unlike historical disciplines where you can pick up and examine a physical object, VR allows you to create your own narrative and sequence through the act of touching. You can play with narrative.

VMcC: In the VR game, you're outside with the Rocking Stone at night and there's several objects lying around that can be "picked up". Depending on what object you pick up you can become "bewitched" or experience what it's like to be accused of being a witch (both have horrifying consequences for the user). The video game is choice-driven and you play as a witch-hunter. You can lead with empathy or convict suspects for in-game rewards (such as money, power, prestige with town's magistrates). You can decide whether to create a better world or to just look after you and yours. This is a game where it is very hard to be morally good.

Stephen Butler: Comic books are always collaborative. It's perfect when it's done well. What was the collaborative process like for the comic book?

VMcC: I initially applied for a small grant of £5k that would help get this work to a wider audience. The major story elements are already there in Andrew's book as there are chapters around a well-respected woman, the accusation, the wheels of justice. There was already a nice chronological story already there. But my main concern was that no-one would believe that this was an actual historical event – that it was too fantastical!

SB: Comic book horror is usually (psychologically) supernatural in character. Is there an implication of the supernatural in this comic?

VMcC: The comic utilises horror since it is the only genre that gives credence to the supernatural. It is the best genre to explore forces that threaten vulnerable members of society and victims of power and repression (especially women). It emphasises the undermining of certainty via the point-of-view. We wanted to leave things open to interpretation and plunge the reader into the reality of the time – so sowing the seeds of doubt and then uncertainty. A picture really tells a thousand words and makes the event less abstract and more concrete. The comic employs an austere colour scheme with use of light and dark to reiterate the omnipresence and menace of the supernatural.

AS: When I'm trying to teach students about witchcraft, especially when it comes to witchcraft accusations, students tend to say that people back then didn't really *believe* in it – that it was a form of scapegoating, so there's not really a supernatural element; that a lot of the accused were marginal or troublesome people (especially women) who society wanted rid of. Of course, this was the case in some trials in early modern Europe, but there were often many overlapping reasons why people were accused, prosecuted and convicted of witchcraft. Also, the people who were accused of it believed in it. People doing the accusing believed in it. The comic form easily conveys this complexity. It is as easy as POV.

VMcC: It was a scary moment deciding that we were going to give Mary Dunbar part of the narrative in the comic. I actually loathed her for a while... but she had challenges of her own and lived in that scenario where she was treated as kind of unimportant. I think it was a way of pushing back against society's horrors (especially the horrors of moralism and domesticity) mostly through the figure of the adolescent female who is often figured as a site of moral contestation and apparent self-destruction.

Frank Ferguson: Thinking about the proximity of the witchcraft trials in the 1710s, and the five ships in 1718 (which marked the beginning of mass migration by Scottish Presbyterians from Ulster to North America)... Islandmagee is seen as the most Scottish place on the island of Ireland. How far would this concept of the supernatural be seen as a Scottish import?

AS: Trials for witchcraft under the 1586 Witchcraft Act certainly occurred only in Protestant areas in the early modern period but witchcraft belief, of slightly different variety, can be found in Catholic, native Irish communities. Although this was the last trial for witchcraft in Ireland and even though the witchcraft act was repealed in 1821, accusations of witchcraft were made throughout Ireland, in all four provinces, by Catholic and Protestants, up to the mid twentieth century, and survived in the oral tradition well into the 1980s. Creative writers, historians and journalists tended to ignore this continuing, adaptive belief, seeing witchcraft belief as a thing of the past using enlightenment rhetoric. This involved constructing a barrier between the enlightened self and the barbarism of the past in places that experienced witch-hunting. This was easier to do in Ireland because there weren't many of them to begin with: only a handful. By the later nineteenth century in Ireland, historic witch trials like that of Florence Newton in 1661 and the Islandmagee witches were used as oppositional tools by competing political and cultural factions and were increasingly polarised across Unionist and Nationalist lines: the former tended to "forget" the 1711 trial as embarrassing and the latter as an example of a cultural pollutant coming from Imperial mainland Britain. Creative writers up to the mid twentieth century on the other hand tended to gender the case and reinforce normative femininity by not talking about William Sellor and seeing the women as worthy of empathy and pity because they were pious and helpless in the face of a relentless legal system. By contrast, one of the reasons why they made witches believable was that they challenged and resisted power structures and accepted models of womanhood.

So, while witchcraft and witch trials may have been represented as something in the past that we had travelled beyond, it continued to be a feature of Irish society. Ronald Hutton's *The Witch* (Yale University Press, 2017) suggests that witchcraft and the fear of witchcraft are present in nearly all human societies.

FF: The thing I think you do brilliantly is something that academic work can't do – and that's generating empathy. And using all the various art forms to generate empathy. Because empathy is often what gets lost, and then we forget. And you know, thinking about all the traumatic moments that have occurred in Irish history, what you're looking at is a decade which is difficult for some people to talk about due to the supernatural and complex life conditions. I suppose my question is: did you just sort of discover empathy or was it generated by, let's take a disciplinary approach and see what we can come up with?

VMcC: That's a really good question. I think your lived experience definitely comes into it. I see the event as a microcosm for the trauma people are (and were) experiencing daily – we wanted to give credence to multiple points of view so that everyone gets heard. I don't think it's anything we consciously invited but it's in there, I guess. With the times we're in right now, there's no wonder there's an appetite for this stuff.

AS: "Try to understand and not condemn" is the crux of the project. We want to generate empathy – a kind of radical empathy. The Presbyterians were excluded from local government, the only Protestant denomination on the island who had no political representation, and there's economic downturn coming. A famine was on the horizon, Penal Laws were in effect. It was definitely a "pressure cooker" situation, where everyday pressures were magnified by wider societal problems. That's what the comic is good at – historians can give you the facts and tell you how many people there were, what happened to them, but what fiction can do is move you.

Alice McCullough: I've just finished working on a four-year project on this subject, which combined music, poetry and puppetry.² We had this incredible puppeteer who's worked on *Star Wars* and with Jim Henson. She made these incredible puppets including the Demon Boy seen in the comic. I was brought in to write and perform the narration for the piece. I ended up writing it from the perspective of mental health, because I have lived experience of hospitalisation due to my mental health. To me fiction can tell it better: you can evoke empathy, but also because there were so many versions of the story, I had to fictionalise it at certain points. To me Mary Dunbar was a schizophrenic. I didn't use that word in the piece, but that was my perspective: evoking empathy via disability. The project became a very, very personal story. And there ended up being a bit of conflict there in that I wanted to go much deeper, but there's a sense of responsibility to the past.

VMcC: There's something for everyone to resonate with this story. And it's also a good opportunity to push back against the "sexy witch" trope.

AMcC: It's important to me that the work is rooted deeply in the facts and the history and the academic work and the grassroots work, that it's not sensationalised. For me the story is more rooted, more realistic. It's not a horror story anymore: if this happened today, she'd be straight into a psychiatric hospital. I really want to open up that story and have disabled people at the helm of telling this story further. My goal would be people being actually moved to tears. Radical empathy is what we've been talking about today: the invisible history, the history of disability. I think it's about reclaiming those stories and having disabled people be part of the narrative and part of its creation.

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Stephen Butler is Lecturer in English (Modern Fiction) at Ulster University. His research focuses on crime fiction, modern Irish writing and global literature and has published widely on these topics. He co-edited *John Banville and his Precursors* (Bloomsbury, 2019), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Literature* (2020) and *Crime Fiction: A Critical Casebook* (Peter Lang, 2018).

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Frank Ferguson is Director of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies and Research Director for English at Ulster University. *Balancing Acts: Conversations with Gerald Dawe on a Life in Poetry* was published in 2023 by Irish Academic Press. His publications include numerous articles on Irish, Scottish and Ulster-Scots literature as well as *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology*. He was part of the Expert Advisory Panel which produced the report *Recommendations for an Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage & Culture Strategy* (2021) for the Department for Communities for Northern Ireland.

² *Song of the Bones*, a collaboration with Claire McCartney and Beccy Henderson of the band VOKXEN, puppeteer Claire Roi Harvey, and percussionist David McLaughlin was staged at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast in October 2022.

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Victoria McCollum is an internationally-recognised educator and researcher from Ulster University who writes books on films, TV shows and video games (especially horror), to explain why popular culture matters in helping us gain a deeper understanding of our moment in time. Among a wide range of publications, she edited *Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror & The Politics of Fear* was published (Routledge, 2019) and authored *Post-9/11 Heartland Horror: Rural horror films in an era of urban Terrorism* (Routledge 2016). She has collaborated on projects with Apple, Cartoon Network, Cinemax, Facebook, HBO, New Line Cinema, RTE, Sky Atlantic, Telltale Games, Time Warner, Twitter and Universal Music Group.

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Alice McCullough is a poet, visual artist, and filmmaker based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Her short film “Earth to Alice” (2021) was commissioned by the BBC, and has been enthusiastically received internationally (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ni3I9sZTfxI>) She was poet-in-residence with Disability Rights California (DRC) in 2023 and received a Major Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 2022.

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Andrew Sneddon is the leading expert on the history of the Islandmagee witch trial of 1711, and has published widely on Irish witchcraft and magic, including four books, most recently *Representing Magic in Modern Ireland: Belief, History and Culture* (Cambridge University Press 2022). Since publishing *Possessed by the Devil: The Real History of the Islandmagee Witches and Ireland's Only Witchcraft Mass Trial* (History Press, 2023), he has taken the untold story of the Islandmagee witches and Irish witchcraft to new, diverse, international audiences. He regularly appears on local and national TV and Radio, including BBC, ITV, TG4 and RTE. Between 2016 and 2021, he was historical consultant on the first 6-part series dedicated to Irish witchcraft, *An Diabhal Inti* (The Devil’s in Her), produced by Lagan Media. He is outgoing President of Ireland’s oldest professional historical society, Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies.

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