

'Witches' Stories – Folk healers and midwives accused and persecuted for helping others: secondary analysis of the online Survey of Scottish Witchcraft

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PROJECT SUMMARY

What is the background to this project?

In Scotland, 3212 named people were accused of witchcraft between 1563-1736. Witchcraft was a crime and about two-thirds of those accused were strangled and burnt at the stake. People were accused of witchcraft for multiple reasons. Some were accused for reasons relating to their work as folk healers and midwives e.g. if it was thought they had made someone better by transferring their sickness or pain onto another. These healers and midwives are considered to be the professional ancestors of today's nurses and midwives but, they have never been researched from a nursing and midwifery perspective.

What did we do?

We searched the freely available online Survey of Scottish Witchcraft (SSW) (Goodare *et al.* 2003) to identify people accused of witchcraft in Scotland between 1563-1736 for reasons relating to their folk healing or midwifery. We created biographies for each of these people by extracting information from the SSW and from archival church and legal documents. In creating these biographies, we identified folk healing and midwifery practices, highlighting what these individuals did, and used, when caring for the sick or supporting women during childbirth. We then reviewed these practices from a nursing and midwifery perspective and identified a small group of the accused who were of special interest from a nursing or midwifery perspective. We then researched this group in more depth using archival documents.

What did we find?

We identified 142 people (118 women, 24 men) on the SSW accused of witchcraft for reasons relating to their folk healing or midwifery practices. Their trial end dates ranged from 1572 to 1708. Overall, details about these individuals are sparse and their witchcraft accusations are complex. These individuals had multiple reasons for being accused of witchcraft – they were not solely accused for reasons relating to their healing and midwifery work. As the focus of their

witchcraft accusations was the harm they were perceived as doing to others, often little was recorded about their healing practices e.g., sometimes we know what they used, such as herbs, but not how they used these and when. Nonetheless, we gathered a wealth of insight about who these people were and what they did as healers and midwives.

Most used charms and rituals in their healing e.g., they walked anti-clockwise or washed clothes in south running water. Some were using herbs and spices medicinally, making draughts, poultices, and dressings. One woman was using mercury, which was used in medical practice into the mid-20th century, to treat leprosy. In addition to treating physical illness and childbirth pain, many of those we studied had spiritual elements to their healing e.g. using prayers or holy well water. Such actions became considered unorthodox and ungodly after 1560 when Scotland underwent religious reformation, moving from Catholicism to Protestantism. Pre-reformation, some Catholic orders were recognised for their healing knowledge and hospital nursing originated in the religious houses. Our study findings suggest that some of those we studied were taught about healing practices by those connected to these earlier religious healers.

What does this mean?

We now know the names of some early nurses and midwives accused of witchcraft and have some insight into their curing and caring practices. We can tell the stories of these women and men, giving them their place in the history of nursing and midwifery and recognise that they were unfairly accused and treated.

Who funded this study?

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Who are we?

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