

Witchfinding

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A review of

Brian Levack, *Witch-Hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics and Religion* (Routledge: London, 2008). ISBN (13): 978-0-415-39943-2, 217pp.

As one would expect from a book written by a scholar of Levack's standing, this is an excellent volume. The work begins with a very useful overview comparing witchcraft prosecutions in Scotland with England (in particular) and elsewhere. It makes the extremely important point that most of the Scottish trials were conducted by 'laymen', or men with little or no legal training. When those with legal training were involved the levels of convictions dropped dramatically. This suggests that some of the key observations from Continental research also apply in Scotland – the further a defendant got from the place of accusation (via appeal) and the more trained (in the law) the prosecutors and judges became the greater the likelihood of acquittal. The chapter is also excellent in stressing the differing political and religious cultures of the two kingdoms and the effect both had on witch-hunting.

After this initial introductory chapter, the volume turns to examine some of these key areas in detail. The second chapter considers Scots Law and its impact on witch-hunting. This chapter highlights similarities between England and Scotland but notes the lack of the grand jury in Scotland. This meant that Scottish trials could begin as a result of magisterial initiative while, in England, a grand jury (made up of neighbours) had to issue an indictment (or 'true bill') before a trial could commence. Also, the chapter notes the (*illegal*) use of judicial torture in Scotland as another key feature. This torture was usually pre-trial and used to convince the national officials to allow local officials to pursue investigations and trials. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of the prominent role of the Calvinist clergy in the trials as well as the actual 'process' of a witch trial.

The third chapter focuses specifically on the important role of James VI (later James I of England) in witch-hunting and the importance of his experience of witchcraft as part of an alleged treasonous plot against his life (the North Berwick trials). The impact of these trials on his ideas becomes abundantly clear through an evaluation of his *Demonologie*, the only witchcraft treatise published by any early modern prince. Having set this stage, Levack then considers (in chapter four) the complex situation which emerges throughout Scotland and England during the traumatic period of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms in the 1640s. This chapter highlights the extent to

which changes in England which replicated some of the previously discussed idiosyncrasies of Scotland produced an increase in English witch-hunting. This serves to substantiate the emphasis Levack places on these features in producing a distinctly Scottish witch-hunt in the earlier period. The next chapter is a detailed study of Scotland's greatest witch-hunt, in 1661-2. Levack places responsibility for this hunt at the feet of 'lesser magistrates' (including local clergy) – an interesting twist on the usual prominence this group has in Calvinism.

The sixth chapter focuses on the place witch-hunting and ideas about witchcraft had in evolving ideas of the state, politics, and (in the Stuart mind) royal power. In his next chapter, Levack considers a late development in Scottish witchcraft: demonic possession. This is presented as a final stage in ideas about a phenomenon fast being discredited and is located solidly within examples of demoniacs across the Continent in the same period. The final two chapters treat both the decline and end of witch-hunting (and prosecutions for witchcraft in general) as well as the few later accusations of witchcraft which demonstrate that, while the ruling (and legal) élite no longer believed in the ability to prosecute witches, the populace (and many others in local élites) still were convinced of the reality of witchcraft and the need to stamp it out by exterminating witches.

This detailed study does much to locate Scottish witch-hunting in the wider context of early modern witch-hunting both in Britain as well as the Continent. It rather neatly identifies and expounds those features of Scottish culture, politics, religion and society which produced a differing approach to witchcraft than seen in England. The volume is very readable and will be ideal for undergraduate students as well as scholars more generally. Most usefully, each individual chapter can be studied separately which would make the volume of use in courses looking at early-modern witchcraft more generally as well as (in its entirety) in courses on early-modern British/Scottish witchcraft.