81 Witches of Prestonpans

By Annemarie Allan

Prestoungrange University Press (2005)
58 pages, softcover

Review by Hans Sherrer

Waves of hysteria about the presence and activities of witches periodically swept over Scotland from the mid-16th to the early 18th century. That hysteria was reflected in the Scottish Witchcraft Act, signed into law in 1563 by Mary Queen of Scots, which "forbade, on pain of death, any use of magic. In addition, anyone who consulted a magic user was subject to the same penalty." (p.13)

Prestonpans is presently a small city of 7,000 on Scotland's southeast coast about 10 miles east of Edinburgh. It was at center stage during the thousands of Scottish witch trials held during the 1500 and 1600s. Proportionate to its population four centuries ago, there were more accused witches convicted in Prestonpans than any other village, town or city in Scotland, and its total number of "witches" exceeded that of much larger municipalities.

A charge of witchcraft was instituted by one of three methods: "accusations by neighbours, a sorcerous reputation, [or] the naming of another individual by a witch under interrogation." (p. 16) Although the charge of witchcraft was deemed to be evidence of guilt, a conviction was assured if it was augmented by a confession.

Knowing it meant a death sentence, an accused "witch" was typically resistant to confessing. Consequently extraordinary torture techniques were often employed to encourage a confession. Among the more mundane tactics were sleep deprivation, starvation, and being stripped naked and kept in a cold damp holding cell for weeks or even months until one's tongue was loosened. The more vigorous tactics to induce a confession included being dipped in a river or held under freezing water (a medieval form of present day water boarding), and being skinned alive by being forced to wear a "hair shirt dipp'd in venegar" (p. 17) It was also common for a 'witch pricker' to search for the "witches mark" by inserting a 3" long needle into various parts of an accused person's body.

Once convicted, the witch was executed – usually by public strangulation and burning of his or her body. After the execution, the cost of the "witches" torture, trial and execution was reimbursed by the condemned person's estate or family members.

A modern resurgence of interest in that dark time during Prestonpans history began after the publication in 2001 of *The Deil's Ain* (The Devil's Own). Written by Scottish historian Roy Pugh, the book documented the execution of 81 Prestonpans residents convicted of witchcraft. The executions occurred between 1590 and 1679. The actual number is believed to be much higher, but Pugh only included the verifiable cases for which records still exist. Pugh described the period from 1563 to 1727 in Scotland as a "mini-holocaust," since as many as 4,500 Scots were convicted of witchcraft and executed.

Prestonpans lies within the domain of the Barons Courts of Prestoungrange & Dolphinstoun. On July 27, 2004, Prestoungrange's Baron Gordon Prestoungrange and Dolphinstoun's Baron Julian Wills exercised their ancient baronial authority by pardoning the 81 men, women and children identified in *The Deil's Ain* as having been executed for witchcraft. (See *Pardon And Annual Remembrance Of 81 "Witches"* on page 21 of this *JD* issue.)

The Barons Courts also proclaimed that henceforth a Remembrance shall be held on each Halloween commemorating the injustice perpetrated on the 81 people wrongly convicted and executed as "witches." The first Remembrance was held on October 31, 2004, the second on October 30, 2005, and the third is scheduled for Halloween 2006.

To provide background information about the Remembrance observance, the Prestoungrange University Press commissioned Annemarie Allan to write a historical study of the period of time during which the witchcraft trials and executions occurred. Published in 2005, Allan's book, *81 Witches of Prestonpans*, goes far beyond being a recounting of Prestonpans local history. It provides an overview for the witch hunts in Scotland, which were "exported" to England by King James I (who prior to his coronation had been Scotland's King James VI), and then "exported" to New England by Protestant émigrés – eventually resulting in the Salem witch trials of 1692.

81 Witches of Prestonpans also identifies that some responsibility for the English (and subsequent New England) witchhunts can be attributed to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although *Macbeth's* exact publication date is uncertain, it is known to have been about the time King James I ascended the throne in England in 1603. Allan writes about *Macbeth*:

> "The tale of a kingdom torn apart by the murder of its lawful King, of the unnatural signs and portents which accompany the murder of Duncan, God's ordained monarch and the treasonable sorcery on the part of the witches incorporates all the major themes of the witch panics of the 1590s. References to the ancestry of King James in the character of Banquo make it clear that Shakespeare was linking his work of fiction to the person of the King and the details included within the play clearly reveal the author's familiarity with the description of events contained within `Newes from Scotland'.
>
> The pursuit of witches did not, however, limit itself to England. By the time James succeeded to the throne of England, colonisation of the eastern seaboard of the American continent had already begun and the witchcraft act of 1604 has been identified as a primary cause of the most famous episode of witch persecution in America, the Salem witch trials of 1692." (p. 42)

The public's belief in witches was fueled by civil and religious leaders who saw it as a method of "controlling the population through religious fanaticism." (*The Deil's Ain*, p. 147) When public authorities issued an order for a witch-hunt, the superstitious fears of a large segment of the population was unleashed — distracting them from real problems that plagued their lives.

An interesting sub-theme of Allan's book is that the widespread belief in witches was used by opportunists to accuse well-to-do persons of witchcraft so they could acquire their assets. In 1662 the Privy Council denounced accusers "who only acted out of envy or covetousness. All such unauthorised proceedings were now forbidden." (p. 40)

Allan's book also touches on the modern relevance of the witch hunts that occurred centuries ago. She notes that Arthur Miller's 1953 play, *The Crucible*, while ostensibly about the Salem witch trials, was written during the time of the McCarthy Red Scare in the U.S. – when many people were mislead into

81 Witches cont. on page 21

Innocent People Are Executed The Question Is: How Many?

The following eight articles and reviews don't even scratch the surface of the large body of work substantiating that innocent people are, and have been wrongly convicted of a capital crime for centuries in countries whose legal system evolved from England's Common Law. While some of those errors have been detected prior to carrying out of the sentence, the unanswered question is how often they have not, and the frequency with which those errors continue to occur.