'Sharp and funny with justifiable rage'
VAL MCDERMID

'A defiant memorial to thousands of women'
MALCOLM GASKILL

HOW TO KILL A WITCH

A GUIDE FOR THE PATRIARCHY

CLAIRE MITCHELL
ZOE VENDITOZZI
THE WITCHES OF SCOTLAND

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Leading human rights lawyer Claire Mitchell, KC, and writer, Zoe Venditozzi formed the Witches of Scotland campaign with the aim of shining a light on the historic injustice of the Witch Trials. As a result, on International Women's Day, 2022, the First Minister of Scotland, at issued a formal state apology – the first time in 300 years there had been any formal recognition of those who were most wrongly accused.

Through their tireless campaigning, regular public appearances, and highly entertaining podcast, also called *The Witches of Scotland*, this pair of 'quarrelsome dames' are currently working to build a lasting memorial to the murdered women, and campaign to draw attention to the continued persecution of women as witches around the world today.

In 2022, Claire and Zoe were made Doctors of Laws by the University of Dundee in 2022 in recognition of their work. Claire lives in Montrose and Edinburgh and Zoe lives in Fife.

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This book is dedicated to the people, mostly women, who were accused, tortured and executed as witches, and those who still face those unfounded accusations today.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

This book is a combination of research, conversation, obsession and a little speculation. When it comes to the persecution of women as witches, historical detail is on occasion lacking. In our book, Zoe has written several pieces that are fictional extemporizations, based on what we know, in order to highlight the human stories and underscore the impact of historical events on individuals. These sections are marked in *italics*.

We've used a smattering of Scots, one of the three official languages of Scotland, throughout the book, where its vocabulary feels most apt. For non-Scottish readers, there's a Glossary of Scots Words included on page 265.

'IN MEMORIAM'

They tried tae tak yer spirit, hen,
Destroy that which they couldnae control.
So ye spak and the world didnae listen, hen,
Smoort the smeddum that burned in yer soul.
Noo yer're deid but never gone, hen,
There's thaim that still cairry yer name.
There's thaim that mind criminals, bidin in courts
Heids hingin heavy wae shame.

Auld Nick didnae ken ye fae Eve, hen,
Ye hae but yer ain een tae see.
The wrang wasnae yours,
The guilt wis misplaced,
Yer innocence plain as can be.

But they taen muckle mair than a life, hen,
A caunle snuffed oot in its prime.
A state sanctioned murder ae innocent fowks,
Punishment lackin a crime.
Yer soul's noo at peace wae the earth, hen,
Sleep and be wan wae the sky.
We'll aye scrieve yer name in books they cannae burn,
Write a legacy never tae die.

But we willnae just beg ae yer pardon, hen,
Those days have lang ceased tae exist.
We noo demand justice fur aw those lit you –
Lang gone, but eternally missed.

Len Pennie

Scots-language poem commissioned by the Witches of Scotland

INTRODUCTION

Allow us to introduce ourselves.

We are Claire Mitchell, a lawyer with an interest in public inquiries, human rights and crime (and a 'KC', that is King's Counsel, a senior advocate), and Zoe Venditozzi, a novelist and a creative writing/additional support needs teacher. Everybody knows us as the Witches of Scotland, although that is actually the name of the campaign that we launched. Having said that, we are very happy to be known as 'quarrelsome dames', and yes, we do live in Scotland.

This is how it all started . . .

In 2019, in the course of her work as a KC, Claire was researching the crime of violating a sepulchre, commonly known as 'body snatching' – a crime made famous by the 19th-century craze for robbing graves in order to sell the corpses to anatomists. Claire was looking into the 2004 case of two teenagers who broke into an ornate stone mausoleum in Greyfriars Kirkyard (churchyard) in Edinburgh. The boys forced open a coffin, stole a skull and played football with it until they were caught in the act by a tour guide. It was thought that the head belonged to none other than one of Edinburgh's most famous historical figures – Sir George 'Bloody' Mackenzie, who had earned his nickname for imprisoning over a thousand Protestant Covenanters in a field next to the graveyard where he was ultimately buried.† As former Lord Advocate, he was the head of the

† These Covenanters were a group of rebellious Presbyterians who were locked in an ideological (and often literal) battle with the church and state in the 17th century. On 22 June 1679, a large uprising was defeated by state forces at the Battle of Bothwell Brig and up to 1,200 prisoners were taken to Edinburgh and held in the field. They were denied basic amenities; many were executed and hundreds more starved to death at the hands of their

prosecution system in Scotland for more or less two decades until his death in 1691.

Ultimately the teen grave robbers were not jailed, but Claire's research on Mackenzie led her down an interesting rabbit hole. She discovered that during his career he was involved in numerous witch trials, including that of a woman called Maevia whom he actually defended in 1661. He was reported to have said, 'I am not of their opinion, who deny that there are Witches, though I think them not numerous.'

And this was where Claire got sidetracked and pulled into the world of witch trials. It was clear that Mackenzie was making an interesting distinction. He didn't entirely take the sceptic's position that witches did not exist, but he did seem to be arguing that accusations were too numerous for them all to be correct. This theory is borne out by the fact that during his time as Lord Advocate he endeavoured to cut down on the number of cases brought to trial. A sensible middle ground position at a time of very heightened sensibilities – as we shall see.

Even at this early stage in Claire's reading, though, the human stories exerted a pull across the centuries. As she researched Mackenzie's cases, Claire came across one poor woman who, during the course of her interrogation, asked her persecutors if it was possible to be a witch 'and not know it'. The desperate situation this woman surely found herself in affected Claire deeply.

At around the same time, Claire read Sara Sheridan's book *Where Are the Women?* In this book, Sheridan reimagines Scotland as a place where all the streets are named after women and there are museums and grand buildings dedicated to the great women of Scotland. This complete reversal of how Scotland was actually constructed brought into sharp focus how much of our civic lives are centred

captors. Mackenzie's cruel treatment of them resulted in the legend of his fearsome ghost, a poltergeist, who it is said still haunts the graveyard today. People would look through the doors of the mausoleum and chant the old rhyme: 'Bluidy Mackenzie, come oot if ye daur, lift the sneck and draw the bar.'

around men's achievements, and how neglected Scotland's women are in terms of being a visible part of the geography of our nation.

So it was with this in mind that one day, when she was walking her dogs, Redford and Crombie, in Edinburgh's Princes Street Gardens, Claire found herself beside a life-sized statue of Wojtek, a Polish bear who became an unofficial mascot for the Allies during the Second World War. Standing there she realized that there was not one statue of a named woman in Scotland's capital city's main green space. There were plenty of statues of men – artists, authors, soldiers – and even, in this case, a bear. But not a single woman.

And looking above Wojtek's head she saw the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle, scene of hundreds of executions of innocent women – for it was mostly women – convicted of witchcraft. These few hundred were only a small number of the many thousands of those accused of witchcraft in Scotland between the early 16th and mid-18th centuries – somewhere between 3,000–5,000 people in total. She thought to herself, not only are we not properly recording the brilliant achievements of women in our society in the history books or celebrating their success in public spaces, but we also are not recording when terrible acts have been perpetrated against them. In fact, on the esplanade at the spot of the executions there was a plaque that merely reinforced their – entirely incorrect – status as witches.

There and then, as she stood beside Wojtek, Claire resolved to do something about this. What better way for a human rights lawyer to highlight the inequality of memorializing Scottish women's achievements and redress a gross miscarriage of justice than by drawing attention to the Scottish witch trials and seeking an apology for the accused and a pardon for those convicted, and by creating a lasting memorial?

At that moment, the Witches of Scotland campaign was born.

A short while before Claire's revelation in Princes Street Gardens, the two of us had met at a mutual friend's wedding, where we bonded over our love of true crime podcasts. Discovering that we both had a ridiculously detailed knowledge

of real-life murders, we came up with a theory about why women in particular love true crime. In our view, it was down to a combination of the pragmatism of learning how not to get abducted and murdered (always useful), coupled with an element of bearing witness to all the women who were not so lucky. All the while thinking, there but for the grace of God . . .

Toasting Mel and Drew, the happy couple that day, Zoe mentioned she would like to start a podcast, but couldn't think of an angle. A few weeks later, Claire got in touch with a simple idea, though one that turned out to be surprisingly effective. We would create a podcast that would promote the nascent Witches of Scotland campaign.

From the first podcast, recorded on an iPhone propped up on Zoe's washing machine in her basement, the Witches of Scotland campaign and podcast became a worldwide phenomenon.

And then something momentous happened.

On International Women's Day in 2022, the First Minister of Scotland, at the request of the Witches of Scotland campaign, issued a formal state apology to all those accused of witchcraft in Scotland – the first time in 300 years there had been any official recognition of those who were wrongly accused.

It has been an extraordinary journey. The campaign has sparked a worldwide cultural conversation about women's history and women's place in the modern world. Today, the campaign works towards its remaining aims of creating a national memorial and a legislative pardon, and is actively working with a number of Witches of Scotland-inspired groups throughout the country to bring these aims to fruition.

How to Kill a Witch is a book that details, step by step, the stages undertaken to identify, try and ultimately kill a woman as a witch. It is a book that we have researched by studying original documents and gathering advice and encouragement from some of the best historians and experts in the field. In the course of writing the book we have followed in the footsteps of those who lived hundreds of years ago, visiting graves, attending memorials and meeting with

experts in history, art, music, writing. Each of these experts has generously given of their own time to help educate us, and our supporters, about the history of witch trials in Scotland and around the world. To each and every one of them we are very grateful. What we learned shocked us, even steeped as we are in the campaign. The truth about the Scottish witch trials is bloody and horrific: we hope that the resulting book is one that underlines the incredible lengths that people – mostly men – went to in order to silence women.

How to Kill a Witch also goes beyond what we learned about historical witchcraft trials here and abroad, and draws out what we see as the modern-day relevance – that when the going gets tough in any society, it is the vulnerable that are accused of causing the damage, as an easy target to avoid dealing with the greater problems of inequality.

You will soon appreciate that the book is not an academic tome – it is the experience of two women learning about their history and casting a fresh light on their present. In fact, there is some fictional writing in the book in the italicized sections, which we hope helps put the reader in the headspace of the persecuted – or indeed the persecu*tor*. Something a real historian would never do! As any listener of the podcast will know, we approach our task with reverence to those who were accused of witchcraft, and irreverence to everything else.

In fact, we even initially started to write the book in a way that was a sort of tongue-in-cheek manual for potential patriarchal persecutors out there, so that they would know just how to kill a witch if they came across one. While the 'manual' idea was dropped as we became more and more involved (and outraged) with what we found, we still found that starting point incredibly useful. Breaking the persecution of women as witches down into its individual stages made us look at the whole process forensically (in the case of the chapter about burning witches, we mean that absolutely literally). From identifying a witch, interrogating her and putting her to trial, to killing her, burying her and losing her in history – you will be surprised how much there is to find out about the subject.

We also examine how other countries such as the USA dealt with their witch problem – using the case study of the most famous witch panic of all, the Salem

witch trials – and finally question whether women should still be wary today. We'll tell you about the continued use of violence against women; the rise of women identifying as witches, particularly online; and the increasing number of modern-day witchcraft accusations worldwide.

A word on historical detail (or the lack of it). Shortly after the infamously bloody witch trials of the early 1690s in Salem, USA, it was accepted that there had been a most grievous miscarriage of justice. The dreadful history was commemorated in legal writings and in family campaigns to exonerate the accused, which served to keep the story of the terrible wrongs perpetrated against their kin alive. As a result, the names of those involved and their stories were carefully recorded and subsequently studied by academics, historians and lawyers.

The circumstances could not have been more different in Scotland. Poor record-keeping of witchcraft accusations and trials leaves us bereft of much of the detail we would want to know. Sometimes we only know that trials took place because citizen historians have checked parish financial records, which merely recorded the cost of incarceration of the suspects, or of hiring a 'witch pricker' (of which, more later) or executioner.

The details of the accused and convicted in Scotland were not given the attention of academics and historians at the time. There was no contemporaneous recognition of the fact that thousands of people had been wrongly accused and convicted of witchcraft. Indeed, until International Women's Day 2022, at the behest of the Witches of Scotland campaign, there was no public recognition or apology for the wrongs done at all. With the notable exception of the lawyer and historian Robert Pitcairn who wrote about the trials a century after they finished,† the legal system itself all but ignored this brutal history. While many stories were passed down by word of mouth by those who couldn't read or write – no doubt containing a mix of gossip and truths – there were very few

† We will look at Pitcairn's work in Chapter 9.

contemporaneous *written* works, save for the two we discuss in this book, a pamphlet titled *Newes from Scotland* and a textbook on witch-hunting written by none other than King James VI of Scotland himself,† called *Daemonologie* (see Chapters 3 and 4).

'Why record the history of these terrible witches?', the thinking went. Better to convict these women, strangle them and scatter their very ashes to destroy any record of their being. The view of the state was simple: the witches were dead and justice had been done. There was no appetite for those victorious in their dealings with the Devil to immortalize the details of his handmaidens. Why record what you want to forget?

While modern academics and historians find what scarce detail they can, lack of records means that witchcraft trial records are aggravatingly incomplete. The best records to date can be found in the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft, an online database of all the known historical information about the trials. We highly recommend this resource, although the researchers note in their introduction that a good deal of evidence is still missing. That said, they have used their great skill to piece together what is available. In the meantime, we have given you what we can find; incomplete and sometimes vague as it is at times, this is the reality of working on the history of the Scottish witch trials.

However, by pulling together what scant information there is, by speaking to as many experts as possible, and by feasting on every detail that we *can* get our hands on, we hope we have done justice to these women's stories. *How to Kill a Witch* is certainly not a conventional or straightforward narrative and, like its authors, it rushes hither and thither as we plunge deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole of witch persecution. You will find in these pages stories, discoveries, world-renowned expertise, shameful facts and even parts of *Daemonologie*. You will find a sentencing statement for a witch trial, full details of what it takes to dispose of a human body using fire, and pen portraits of just a few of those many thousands of people accused of witchcraft.

† As of 1603, he became James I of England and Ireland on the death of his cousin Queen Elizabeth I. Throughout the book we'll just refer to him as James VI.

It is our sincere hope that this eclectic, patchwork book that started out as a guide for the patriarchy† will in fact provide every woman and marginalized group with the tools to understand how such accusations arise, and how to guard against it happening again.

Will there come a time when yet again women are accused of witchcraft? As with our theory about the popularity of true crime, we invite women to use the book as a pragmatic learning tool. To learn about and bear witness to all the women who were, and are, not so lucky, while at the same time challenging the damaging patriarchal norms of the society in which we still live.

In sharing what we've learned, we hope to create a worldwide regiment of quarrelsome dames who want an equal place in the world – in life, in public spaces, online.

We are nothing if not ambitious.

Claire Mitchell KC and Zoe Venditozzi

† We want to be emphatically clear. A patriarchal society is one where men as a group dominate the whole group. When we criticize the patriarchy, that does not 'equate' to criticism of men. Women can be in favour of the patriarchy; men can be against it. Yes, for the most part, patriarchal norms are endorsed by those who have most to gain, and many a time that is a man, but that doesn't make it always so. To end the patriarchy, we need both men and women in society to address it.

PART ONE: THE LAW OF THE LAND

ELSPETH REOCH

A CUNNING WOMAN ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT IN ORKNEY

I met the two strangers on the shoreline when I was just a tender girl of 12 years. Both were tall, strong, good-looking men. One in black, one in green tartan. They were speaking away to themselves but when they saw me, they stopped and stared. I stood, just a wee lass, watchful and entranced by the pair. The man in green beckoned me over. I don't remember exactly what they said firstly, but the one in green, I cannot tell you his name, asked me if I would like to scry the future, and if I did, he would tell me how to do it. The face of the one in black was like thunder, but the man in green just nodded his head at him and told me to boil an egg, collect the water that covered its surface, and wash my face with it.

They were so serious that I knew they were not mocking me.

Would that I had ignored them, but I did as he instructed. And my life changed for the worse, though it took me time to realize that. It was like a veil had been dropped from the world and I could now see who was with child, who was sickening, even those who would pass in the coming days. They taught me a cantrip with flowers, too, and I moved around the land, helping people and managing to scratch a living.

I saw them now and then, the man in black more than the other. I never knew when they would arrive, but it was usually at night, always when I was alone. Within a year I was with child, a boy – I will not give his name – and that was when I first began to have the spells of quiet. When the quiet comes down, I can't make myself speak no matter how much I try. It's as if a big, cold hand has been clapped over my mouth and not a sound I can make.

This angers my brother no end, but no matter how firm he is with me, no discipline can heal me. I was able to keep visiting folk and, through actions, I could still help them, and my voice would come and go.

Over the years, the men would appear from time to time. Once, I saw neither for months and I thought my strange times might end but back they came. But then I was with child again and became quiet for a long time, only able to find my voice when my younger boy was beginning to crawl.

This has been a hard and lonely life, just me and my brother and the wee laddies for the last few years, but people have mostly shown me kindness and I enjoy helping those that ail.

Never have I done any of the evils you accuse me of. Never have I hurt anyone.

Sometimes I try to help but people don't get better. Sometimes their time on earth must come to an end. Of course, it sorrows us to lose those we love, but we must believe that beauty awaits us on the other side of this life. This pain I am suffering now can be borne for the love I have been so lucky to have had bestowed upon me by my wee bairns gives me strength. I am pained that I will not see them grown into fine young men.

I had thought that the men would come and visit me in my hour of need, but there has been no sign of them. I am alone and I fear that nobody will come to my aid.

1

HOW TO BELIEVE IN MAGIC

When Elspeth Reoch was accused of being a witch in 1616, she confessed that she had been given the power of second sight by two men who had come from the fairy world, whom she had first met at the age of 12.

Born in Caithness in the Scottish Highlands, Elspeth had been staying with an aunt on an island in Lochaber. The fairy men – one dressed in black, the other in green – had approached her by the loch and told her she was pretty. The one in green told her he could show her how to know anything she wanted. He instructed her to boil an egg every Sunday for three weeks, to collect the condensation in her hands and rub it into her eyes. She did so and developed the power of second sight, after which she earned a small income wandering around her local area, advising folk, discerning pregnancies and performing healing rituals with herbs.

However, Elspeth's relationship with the man in black, who had come to act as her spirit guide, soon started to sour. Not only were they having sex, but he was also controlling and abusive towards her. He told her that in return for the gifts he'd given her, he would take away her power of speech, whereupon she became largely non-verbal. Elspeth was only 14 when, unmarried, she had her first child, and later she had another by a different man. Elspeth's brother, angry that she refused or was unable to speak, beat her with a bridle, tied a bowstring around her head to torture her, then dragged her to church and prayed for her. Unsurprisingly, these tactics failed to cure her.†

† Call us suspicious, but the stories she told and her subsequent refusal to speak sound very much like the processing of trauma.

Accused of witchcraft in March 1616, Elspeth was brought to trial in Kirkwall in Orkney, where she confessed that she had met with the Devil several times, in his guise as a fairy. She was also accused of deception by feigning muteness. Found guilty, she was sentenced to death by strangulation and her body burned that afternoon.

Fairies? Witches? The Devil? This tale may seem nonsensical to modern ears. But in order to understand the period between the 16th and 18th centuries in Scotland we must embrace a fundamental truth of that epoch: magic was real.

This belief was entirely mainstream. More than mainstream; it was entirely accepted as fact. The sale of magical services was commonplace, and purveyors could be sued if the magic didn't work. Both good and bad magic were believed to exist, and it was an incontrovertible fact that the Devil was real. He could take human form, have 'carnal connections' with his choice of women, and throw wild parties complete with bountiful buffets, drink and debauchery. He could infiltrate your mind with intrusive thoughts, take over your body to do his evil business and change into whatever animal he pleased. He could use his magic to trick and deceive, to prey on the godly and ungodly alike. Most importantly for us, he could promise foolish women their heart's desire only to lure them to his dominion as witches.

Sometimes such beliefs are written off as the stupidity or ignorance of our forebears. It was nothing of the sort. In an uncertain world, they were a way of making sense of unpredictable events and offering an illusion of control. Folks have been turning to magic and rituals to influence their fate since the dawn of time, and they still do. Clever, modern sophisticates may scoff at these ideas,† but

† Claire doesn't. She has a spooky heritage. Her Irish granny Rose told her all about the fairies and Otherworld. She took her to the Poisoned Glen at Dunlewey, Donegal and showed her fairy rings, magic circles of pebbles. She was also known for 'reading the cups', a type of fortune telling. Claire remembers her granny solemnly turning the cup upside down on the saucer, turning it anti-clockwise three times and then turning it rightways up to do her

Woodcut showing witches offering gifts to the Devil, from *The History of Witches and Wizards: Giving a true account of all their tryals in England, Scotland, Swedeland, France, and New England; with their confession and condemnation*, 1720

they still linger on in our culture, superstitious remnants of the prevailing belief system of the early modern period in Scotland (1450–1750).

Do you avoid walking under ladders? How would you feel if you broke a mirror? What about putting new shoes on a table? People today consult spiritualists to hear from loved ones long dead, consult the tarot to find their future, pray to specific saints to solve a particular problem, read the runes, consult the tea leaves, phone a psychic for love advice, pray, manifest, join cults. This list is far from exhaustive. Ever check your phone's weather app to plan the weekend? In the 20th century, science-fiction author Arthur C Clarke wrote that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. In many ways, the only difference between us and our forebears is that now, our technology has (almost) caught up. Our human desire to know what's around the corner – that has not changed.

Until the Enlightenment – which took place throughout Europe in the late 17th and 18th centuries – there was a widespread belief that the supernatural world was interwoven with the natural, material world and that the powers of the supernatural could both help and hinder the lives of humans. It was common for people to combine Christian beliefs and behaviours with magical practices to manage everyday life and its travails. From the mid-18th century onwards, religious reformers and newly 'enlightened' thinkers sought to dissuade ordinary folk of their reliance on magic. They were successful to some extent. But the beliefs did not truly go away, and remained particularly common in countries that had a strong tradition of acceptance of the 'Otherworld'.†

Celtic mythology tells us that the Otherworld was a place where spirits, demons, fairies, ghosts and sprites lived. It was a real place but not one known to be frequented by ordinary mortals. Some folk believed fairies had their own world, too: Fairyland, a place between heaven and hell, possibly a reflection of

reading. Claire remembers peering in at the tea leaves, expecting them to dance before her eyes, revealing the future. They never did.

† Ireland, we are looking at you. Despite the pattern of witch trials sweeping across Europe in this period, Ireland remained mostly unaffected, ironically perhaps due to its very strength of belief in magic. People were simply not spooked by the idea of devils and demons.

the fact that fairies could do good deeds as well as bad. These fairies were not of the Tinkerbell genre. They came in the same sizes and shapes as ordinary humans, sometimes having relationships with them, sexual and otherwise. Some people believed fairies were your dead ancestors who for some reason didn't make it to either heaven or hell. For many, though, fairies were tangible, real creatures, despite sometimes being insubstantial and see-through in their bodily form. They were once considered independent beings but, as the Reformation spread throughout 16th-century Europe, the prevailing Scottish Protestant understanding was that as fairies could not be angels, then surely, they must be of the Devil.

So it was that the Christian theology of God, fallen angels and the Day of Judgement was woven through with the stories of the Otherworld; for many people the Christian belief system merely slotted on top the existing supernatural beliefs. In this and in all other aspects of the interaction between the magic world and the mundane world, there were no clear lines of distinction. Kings, queens, the state, the church, academics, philosophers, civil society, intellectuals, writers, artists, the woman in the street – they all believed in magic, and its power to do good and bad. We'll say it again: magic was everywhere.

So who was it that conjured up the magic?

Welcome to the (Other)world of service magicians: charmers, cunning folk and witches. 'Service magician' is a catch-all term for a person who traded in practical magic and the name reveals the ordinary way in which people would pay for a piece of magic to be conducted on their behalf. Charmers, chairmers, or even sometimes charmerers, as the name suggests, were those who sold charms; they were literally folk who 'enchanted'. Their work was done with spells, the spoken word and magical recipes. 'Cunning folk', on the other hand, were people who used ritual or ceremonial magic, for example summoning spirits or performing magical ceremonies. What these two types of magicians have in common is that their magical powers did not emanate from the Devil. In contrast, the power of the third type of practitioner – the witch – was notably

different. A witch's magic came to be defined† as being wholly dependent on his or her master, the Devil.

This critical distinction allowed charmers and cunning folk to continue to peddle their wares without harassment. While doubtless the church would have preferred there to be no service magicians at all, they were nevertheless tolerated as they served a useful role in society, providing magical solutions to practical problems, in love, in luck and in life. A poor crop could mean destitution and starvation for you and your family; a cow failing to produce milk could lead to homelessness; illness could mean imminent death. In such desperate times is it any wonder people tried every solution available?

The work of cunning folk or charmers was rarely full time. The roles were a way for people to make a bit of extra money on top of their main day job. So you might consult a farmer who sold husbandry potions, or someone more educated such as a priest‡ or physician who had attended university.

Hold on now! How could a priest, a man of the cloth, have a spooky side hustle as a cunning person? Well, who better to go to for help than an educated man who has God on his side? It's counterintuitive to us today that priests used magic but, if you think about it, they were already dealing with the supernatural every day.

What if all your linen is lost? A priest might be able to summon an angel or a demon or possibly some divination with a Bible – as long, of course, as the highheidyins did not get to hear about it. That might seem a little bit over the top – troubling an angel to find your lost laundry. But in 16th-century Scotland, this was absolutely acceptable. The service magician was someone you could go to for everyday help, however mundane your problem.

But if you can believe in good magic, then it follows you must believe in bad magic. If there is an omnipotent God, able to intervene in the lives of folk at

† It didn't start that way, but we'll tell you more later.

‡ We're talking about pre-Reformation Catholic priests here. After the Scottish Reformation of 1560, the Catholic Church was outlawed in Scotland. As we shall see in the next chapter, Protestant ministers tended to take a dimmer view of cunning folk and charmers altogether, though they were just about tolerated as long as the Devil was not involved.

will, there must also be his fallen angel Lucifer Morningstar, the Devil – and his handmaid witches who are ready to cause you harm at a moment's notice. Service magic only becomes a problem when things go south – to hell.

The belief in magic, then, real as it was, did not cause the bloody horror of the witchcraft trials. The causes of those? Oh, they were very much man-made.

Let us explain . . .