

**A HISTORY OF THE
WITCHES OF
RENFREWSHIRE**

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A History of the Witches of Renfrewshire by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

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WITCHES OF RENFREWSHIRE.



BARRAN HOUSE.

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A HISTORY
OF THE
WITCHES OF RENFREWSHIRE. //

A NEW EDITION,

WITH AN

INTRODUCTION. //

*Embodying Extracts, hitherto unpublished, from the Records of the
Presbytery of Paisley.*



BARGARRIN ARMS.

5 PAISLEY: ALEX. GARDNER.

// 1877. //
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INTRODUCTION.

WITCHCRAFT is a subject that has bulked largely in the history of mankind. A belief in it has been by no means confined to dark ages and barbarous nations. In Jewish history it held a prominent place. The first king of Israel banished wizards and witches from his borders, but could not set himself free from faith in their spells. Many of his successors had dealings with familiar spirits; and down to the days of Christianity, Gentiles as well as Jews all over the world attributed to certain men and women supernatural powers that were generally exercised for evil. Christianity, though it gave a blow to superstition, by no means eradicated it. The influence of heathen beliefs and practices did not cease to be operative when the majority of a nation formally surrendered them. The evil one has always been regarded as the great king and master of the wizard band; and faith in Witchcraft is yet to be found among certain followers of all religions that recognise the existence of the spirit of darkness. Bishop Hutchinson's curious "Historical Essay on Witchcraft" shews how much such superstitions have served to degrade and enslave the intellect, even during periods that have been characterised by great national progress. Pope Innocent VIII., in 1484,

issued a bull which indicated the beliefs that in his day were entertained regarding the baleful influences exercised by those who were credited with having made a bargain with Satan, accepting certain gifts from him in return for the surrender of their soul's salvation. "They have intercourse with the infernal fiends; they afflict both man and beast; they blight the marriage bed; destroy the births of women and the increase of cattle; they blast the corn on the ground, the grapes in the vineyard, the fruits of the trees, and the grass and herbs of the field." To punish these obnoxious men and women he issued most cruel edicts. The Alpine valleys witnessed thousands of victims slaughtered under excruciating tortures, accused of denying Christ, dishonouring his cross, and in Satan's company maintaining his devil's Sabbath. The strongest minds did not rise above the popular delusion. Luther gravely describes his interviews with the spirit of evil, and tells of many bitter nights and much restlessness which he caused him. "I no longer wonder," he says, "that the persons whom he assails are often found dead in their beds. I am of opinion that Gesner and Ecolampadius came in that manner to their deaths." Knox, too, though of stouter mental calibre than the German Reformer, was mainly instrumental in passing a statute which discharged all persons of whatsoever estate, degree, or condition to use any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, or necromancy under the pain of death, "as well to be execute against the user, abuser, as the seeker of the response or consultation." In Scotland the belief in Witchcraft was all but universal, and was sanctioned by the

highest authority. It is one of the thousand marvellous proofs of Shakespere's fidelity to truth that his witches ply their vocation on Scottish soil. King James VI. was an ardent student of Witchcraft, which his "Daemonologie," in three books, gravely discusses as a science. His was not only a theoretic speculation, but a real experience as to demoniac antipathies. When he returned from Scandinavia with his bride, there was a strong muster of the Satanic army to oppose him. In his presence many poor victims confessed to being in league with Satan, and explained the schemes which had been planned by the powers of darkness to the prejudice and damage of his Scottish Majesty. When it was declared that a wretched woman named Symson had performed the feat, of sailing with two hundred companions from Leith to North Berwick in a sieve, James had her put to torture. She was subjected to the ordeal of the witch's bridle, and to other cruelties. James, by questioning with pitiless pertinacity, elicited the admission that she and her party had baptised a black cat, and raised a dreadful storm to sink the ship that held the king, for which unholy and regicidal effort she was condemned to be burned, and died protesting her innocence, and calling upon God for "the mercy that Christian men withheld." The Scottish enactments against Witchcraft he transferred to England on his accession, and under the statute many persons perished. This Act was not repealed until 1736, when it was obliterated, yet even in 1743 the Associate Presbytery enumerated amongst other national sins that had subjected the nation to Divine wrath, that "The penal sta-

tutes against Witches have been repealed by the Parliament, contrary to the express law of God; for which a holy God may be provoked in a way of righteous judgment to leave those who are already ensnared to be hardened more and more; and to permit Satan to tempt and seduce others to the same dangerous and wicked snare." The Associate Presbytery was composed of seceders from the Scottish Ecclesiastical Establishment, and was in time incorporated into the United Presbyterian Church. The testimony just quoted may be regarded as the last ecclesiastical protest in favour of witch hunting; but it must not be supposed that among clergy of the Establishment and laymen generally there were few sympathisers with the seceders. The annals of the General Assembly bring before us several proofs that belief in Witchcraft was very general at the beginning of the 18th century. In 1699 an overture against Witchcraft or charming was transmitted to Presbyteries, and in 1707 the subject was the occasion of a protracted discussion, which resulted in an instruction to the commission to advise Presbyteries in regard to cases of witchcraft, sorcery, and charming. In 1730 William Forbes, advocate, Professor of Law in Glasgow University, methodically treated of the crime and its symptoms in a professional work, "The Institutes of the Law of Scotland," in which he excuses himself for declining to follow the English commentators who touch the matter as if it were an obsolete belief. "Nothing seems plainer to me than that there may be, and have been witches, and that perhaps such are now actually existing; which I intend, God willing, to