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The Visions of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft and Dark Shamanism in Seventeenth-Century Scotland

Emma Wilby

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The witchcraft confessions given by Isobel Gowdie in Auldearn, 1662, are widely celebrated as the most extraordinary on record in Britain and this book provides the first full-length examination of the confessions and the life and character of the woman behind them. Their descriptive power, vivid imagery, and contentious subject matter have attracted considerable interest on both academic and popular levels. The author's discovery of the original trial records, deemed lost for nearly 200 years, provides a starting point for an interdisciplinary endeavor to separate Isobel's voice from that of her interrogators, identify the beliefs and experiences that informed her testimony, and analyze why her confessions differ so markedly from those of other witchcraft suspects from the period. In the course of these enquiries, the author develops wider hypotheses relevant to the study of early modern witchcraft as a whole, with recent research into Amazonian "dark" shamanism, false-memory generation, and mutual-dream experience, along with literature on marriage-covenant mysticism and protection-charm traditions, all being brought to the investigation of early modern witch-records for the first time. Author Emma Wilby concludes that close analysis of Isobel's confessions supports the still-controversial hypothesis that in 17th-century Scotland, as in other parts of Europe in this period, popular spirituality was shaped through a deep interaction between church teachings and shamanistic traditions of pre-Christian origin. She also extends this thesis beyond its normal association with beneficent magic and overtly folkloric themes to speculate that some of Europe's more malevolent and demonological witch-narratives may also have emerged out of visionary rites underpinned by cogent shamanistic rationales.

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