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## WITCHCRAFT IN SCOTLAND – A GLOBAGS GUIDE

The prosecution of witches in Scotland was inaugurated by the Statute in 1563, this statute being confirmed and extended by several others. It was not repealed until 1736.

Although this statute was contemporary with the corresponding Act in England it was responsible, during the next 150 years, for about five times the number of executions, in proportion to the population, in Scotland than in England. The records show that between 3 and 4 thousand people lost their lives in this way.

In England witches were only burnt for “petty treason” ie killing of their spouse or master. The comparison in favour of England becomes more marked when account is taken of the number of informal executions that were never recorded. For instance a visitor to Scotland in 1644 wrote “I remember that I saw nine witches burnt at the one time in Leith Links”. The court record, however, shows only one capital conviction during the time he was there. One estimate covering the period of only 40 years puts the real number executed for witchcraft at 8,000.

Another reason for the difference between the 2 countries was that , while in England, it was mainly the “lower social orders” – beggars, woman with illegitimate children and the like – who were charged with witchcraft, in Scotland a number of the most respectable, including some of the nobility, were alleged to have made pacts with the devil.

The reason for the upsurge in witch-hunting was not that the people had become more superstitious, it was because the Calvinists who with their literal dependence on the bible (taking as their text “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”) brought to Scotland the continental craze for persecution. Both John Knox and the Regent Moray, for instance, had been great burners of witches.

Any person suspected of witchcraft, were turned over to the “prickers” professional witch finders. It was believed that wherever the devils’ fingers had touched the witch, in the ceremony of initiation, his or her skin remained insensitive and devoid of blood. The pricker, having first stripped his victim, used an instrument, like a large darning needle to ascertain the location of these areas. If an area was found to be insensitive to the probing then they were judged guilty.

Scotland was slightly more humane than England in its treatment of convicted witches. Whereas English witches were burned alive, in Scotland they were wirrit (throttled) before being burned.

The last major witch trial in Scotland was that of the Bargarron witches around 1684, but the last witch to be executed was an imbecile old woman from Dornoch, Sutherland in 1722.

When the various witchcraft acts were repealed in 1736 the Associate Presbytery protested strongly and declared that “It was contrary to the laws of God; for which a holy God may be provoked, in a way of righteous judgement, to leave those, who are already ensnared, to be more and more hardened; and to permit Satan to tempt and seduce others to the same dangers and wicked snares.

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## REFERENCES

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