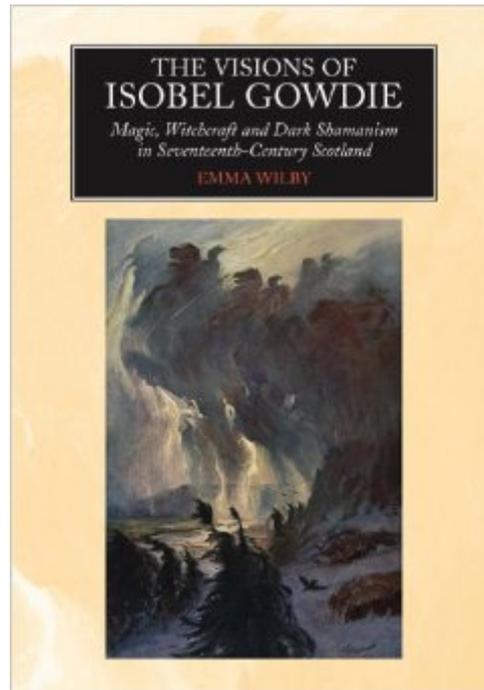


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The Visions Of Isobel Gowdie: Magic, Witchcraft And Dark Shamanism In Seventeenth-Century Scotland



Synopsis

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 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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Customer Reviews

Emma Wilby's compelling and dense study of the Witchcraft confessions of Isobel Gowdie from 1662 in Scotland, "celebrated as the most extraordinary on record in Britain", is a thoroughly impressive analysis, which does not lack for humor, wit, and subtly intuitive nuances of observation and speculation, to propel one enthusiastically through its 546 pages of text. Then too, the reach of this book is far beyond Isobel herself, though she be its inspiration: reading this book will reveal intriguing details about the lives of practitioners of magic and folk traditions in early modern Europe. Wilby's study is wide-ranging, making use of some of the most modern studies in the psychology of "recovery of false memories" in psychotherapy, as well as the intriguing existence of "dark" shamanism among the Yanomamo in the , the more modern mazzeri in Corsica, and elsewhere. She points out that scholars have tended to sentimentalize shamanism and have formerly ignored these "dark" aspects, yet such explorations assist in understanding such things as Isobel's speculated shamanistic rides on plant stalks to shoot at members of her community with "elf arrows," sometimes passionately exclaiming, as she flew, "horse and hattock in the divells name!" Scholar though she is, Wilby clearly takes delight, as any vital, robust and imaginative person among us will, in the passionate, imaginative, lusty, altogether charming spirit of Isobel, which innocently, ironically and perhaps tragicomically, shines through in testimonies given to persons who would use them to eventually put her to death. Wilby often reveals an open admiration for these aspects of Isobel, for instance by labelling a section of her book, "Isobel's Beautiful Curses.

Ms. Wilby happens to be (though merely as a means to an end) among the most effective expositors of what she calls the 'shamanistic paradigm' regarding this direct antecedent to Pre- and Early Modern European 'witchcraft'. The section of this book called 'An Old Way of Seeing' is among the highlights though it is merely a supporting foray relative to the author's analysis of the content of Isobel Gowdie's confessions. This book is a bit pricey and lengthy at ~660 pages. It takes quite awhile to scale all of the carefully laid bricks upon which later insights are built, though following the path so marked sequentially is necessary to grasp the finer points of this book. Though it is relatively jargon free and written in a straight forward style, it is also firmly in the mode of Academic inquiry. The great swaths of material that are basically or primarily speculative in this book are clearly delineated as such. While merely asserting the necessity of opening a door on to 'an uncertainty' she elaborates more verifiable critical analysis and insight on Early Modern witchcraft generally, than in any other book I've read. And when this author renders various contingent

presumptions as 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' she backs that up with substantive data combined with a preponderance of speculative or prospective support for said assertion. I am sold on the modest yet thoroughly elaborated arguments in this book and plan to follow up with other readings from the bibliography. Some years ago I read a book called *Zurvan: a Zoroastrian Dilemma* by R. C. Zaehner which managed in great detail and through brilliant inferential work to render a reconstruction of a suppressed religious tradition (Zurvanism), of which little evidence actually remains. Ms.

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