

BOOK REVIEWS: FICTION

Martina Devlin, *The House Where it Happened* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 2014)

Martina Devlin's novel, *The House Where it Happened*, draws on a number of historical events — the Plantations of Ireland, the murder of Catholic women in 1641, and the persecution and prosecution of eight women of Islandmagee in 1711 — and weaves these together in a compelling tale of the persecution of witches in Ireland in the early eighteenth century.¹ Seen through the eyes of Ellen, the housemaid of Knowehead House, a story unfolds of witchcraft, madness, the suppression of the Catholic majority and the rule of the Presbyterian Church on Islandmagee (a peninsula in County Antrim). The novel opens with a letter from Maud Bell to her husband, Frazer Bell, telling of the events on Islandmagee in January 1641, when twenty Irishwomen and their children were driven to the edge of the cliffs by soldiers from the nearby castle at Carrickfergus. The fragment of the letter stops before the reader learns of the fate of the women and children, but the tale slowly unfolds as the novel progresses.

Knowehead House has been built on land forcibly taken by the Scottish during the time of the Plantations in the early seventeenth century. The house, which can be read as a character in the novel, is a troubled one, beset by unsettling events which cannot be explained with logic or reason. A small family live in the house: James Haltridge, a man of business with interest in the sugar trade; his wife, Isabelle; and their two children, James and Sarah. The house is managed by two indoor servants, Ellen (the narrator) and the cook, Peggy McGregor.

When Isabelle's cousin, Mary Dunbar, comes to stay, the atmosphere in the house darkens, and mysterious, inexplicable events occur: witches' knots appear in an apron; a cap belonging to Haltridge's dead mother, in which she was buried, is found in the folds of the same apron; and Mary claims that she is visited by witches who torment her, causing havoc in her bedroom and forcing her into behaving in ways associated with witches and harlots. Mary's allegations are accepted with alacrity by the local Presbyterian minister and the Elders of the church, particularly when she identifies eight local women as her tormentors, claiming that they are led by the spirit of Hamilton Locke, a participant in the murders in

¹ There are a number of accounts of the trial of the women of Islandmagee, including Andrew Sneddon's *Possessed by the Devil: The Real History of the Islandmagee Witches and Ireland's Only Mass Witchcraft Trial* (Dublin: The History Press Ireland, 2013).

1641. The household at Knowehead House and the local population are whipped up into an anti-witch frenzy and their imaginations are given free rein in a fit of religious mania. However, there are some in the community who find it hard to believe Mary's accusations; Ellen, for example, wonders at one time, '[w]as it possible Mary Dunbar was the witch, and not the witched' (p. 134).

The eight women are unable to defend themselves against Mary Dunbar's eloquent and convincing allegations, and during their trial she elicits the sympathy of both judge and jury, to say nothing of the crowd that gathers to listen to the evidence of ministers of the church and other leaders of the community. Although the women are convicted of witchcraft and imprisoned for twelve months, Knowehead House remains the site of unexplained activity, a haunting alluded to both at the beginning of Ellen's narration and in an apparently contemporaneous report reprinted in 1822 by Samuel M'Skimin. The house, according to this report, 'had for some time believed to be haunted by evil spirits', and this haunting does not cease until Ellen intervenes.²

In an article written in 2014, Martina Devlin describes her emotions when she first 'stumbled across a passing reference' to the witch trials of Islandmagee in 1711. The story, Devlin says, 'fascinated' her, continuing,

Every age has its witches, people marginalised by society. In writing *The House Where it Happened*, I wanted to give back their voices to those eight women. They were silenced twice: once in the courtroom, where they were disbelieved, and later by being written out of history. I also found myself pondering Mary Dunbar: was she mad or bad.³

Devlin has drawn very effectively on archival material which adds a certain verisimilitude to the tale, and it works well as a piece of fiction, as she redresses the balance in her defence of the eight women accused of witchcraft. The novel, however, is not entirely satisfying. The very act of manipulation of the historical facts has led Devlin to exclude some of the original actors and to change the names of others in this horrific trial. It is not, therefore, an accurate account of the story of Mary Dunbar, Knowehead House and the inhabitants of the peninsula of Islandmagee; as a historical gothic tale, however, it is both engaging and entertaining.

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² Samuel M'Skimin, cited in 'R. Y.', 'Witchcraft in Carrickfergus, County Antrim', *Dublin Penny Journal*, 1.47, 18 May 1833, pp. 2, 5 <www.libraryireland.com/articles/CarrickfergusDPJ1-47> [accessed 28 April 2017].

³ Martina Devlin, 'Witch Trials — Forgotten Women of a Bewitched Ireland', *Independent*, 7 September 2014 <<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/witch-trials-forgotten-women-of-a-bewitched-ireland-30565560.html>> [accessed 28 April 2017].