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Cotton Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky Smith Willis  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Henry Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Gogol Busch  
Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato Scott  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott  
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte  
London Descartes Wells Voltaire Cooke  
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**Witchcraft and Devil Lore in the  
Channel Islands Transcripts from  
the Official Records of the  
Guernsey Royal Court, with an  
English Translation and Historical  
Introduction**

John Linwood Pitts

# Imprint

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TO

**EDGAR MacCULLOCH, Esquire,**

F.S.A., LONDON AND NORMANDY, AND MEMBER OF THE  
FOLKLORE SOCIETY,

**BAILIFF OF GUERNSEY,**

WHOSE HISTORICAL RESEARCHES HAVE TENDED SO  
MUCH TO ELUCIDATE THE TIME-HONOURED CONSTITU-  
TION

AND

ANCIENT CUSTOMS OF HIS NATIVE ISLAND,

THIS

BRIEF RECORD OF ONE OF THE DARKEST CHAPTERS IN ITS  
CHEQUERED ANNALS

**IS DEDICATED**

WITH SENTIMENTS OF THE HIGHEST RESPECT AND ES-  
TEEM.

*Venena magnum fas nefasque non valent Convertere humanam vicem.*

Horace, Epod. V. 87-8.



## FOREWORD.

In presenting to the public another little volume of the "Guille-Allès Library Series," it affords me much pleasure to acknowledge various kindnesses experienced during its preparation. From Edgar MacCulloch, Esq., F.S.A., Bailiff of Guernsey, I have received several valuable hints and suggestions bearing upon the subject; and also from F.J. Jérémie, Esq., M.A., Jurat of the Royal Court. I am also particularly indebted to James Gallienne, Esq., Her Majesty's Gref-fier, for his uniform kindness and courtesy in allowing the fullest access at all times to the Archives under his care, not only in respect to the subject-matter of the present publication, but also in other historical researches which I have wished to make. I am equally obliged to Mr. E.M. Cohu and Mr. H.J.V. Torode, Deputy-Greffiers, and to Mr. A. Isemonger, Bailiff's Clerk, for various information and much ready help, which materially facilitated my investigations. All these gentlemen have my cordial acknowledgments and best thanks.

J.L.P.

Guernsey, December, 1885.

Note. — The Seal represented on the title page is that of the Guernsey Bailiwick. It was first granted by Edward I. in the seventh year of his reign (1279), and bears the inscription: S. Ballivie Insule de Gernereye.



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## INTRODUCTION.

The Witchcraft superstitions of the Channel Islands, sad as they were in their characteristics and results—as is abundantly evidenced by our judicial records—were but a part and parcel of that vast wave of unreasoning credulity which swept across the civilised world during the Middle Ages, and more or less affected every class of society, and all sorts and conditions of men. From the lists given in the following pages (pp. 28-32), it will be seen that in about seventy-one years, during the reigns of Elizabeth, James I. and Charles I., no fewer than seventy-eight persons—fifty-eight of them being women, and twenty of them men—were brought to trial for Sorcery in Guernsey alone. Out of these unfortunate victims, three women and one man appear to have been burnt alive; twenty-four women and four men were hanged first and burnt afterwards; one woman was hanged for returning to the island after being banished; three women and one man were whipped and had each an ear cut off; twenty-two women and five men were banished from the island; while five women and three men had the good fortune to be acquitted. Most of these accused persons were natives of Guernsey, but mention is made of one woman from Jersey, of three men and a woman from Sark, and of a man from Alderney.

With regard to the gatherings at the so-called Witches' Sabbaths, there can be no doubt that—quite apart from the question of any diabolic presence at such meetings—very questionable assemblies of people did take place at intervals among the inhabitants of many countries. Probably these gatherings first had their rise in the old pagan times, and were subsequently continued from force of habit, long after their real origin and significance had been forgotten. [Pg 2] Now, it would be very easy for these orgies to become associated—particularly in the then superstitious condition of the popular mind—with the actual bodily presence of the Devil as one of the participants; while it is also not improbable that, in some cases at least, heartless and evil-minded persons worked upon the prevailing credulity to further their own nefarious purposes. Our esteemed Bailiff has offered a suggestion or two of considerable value on this point with regard to certain Guernsey phases of the superstition. He thinks it highly probable that some of these deluded women were

actually the dupes of unprincipled and designing men, who arrayed themselves in various disguises and then met their unfortunate victims by appointment. This idea is, indeed, borne out to a great extent by some of the particulars stated in the following confessions. For instance, some of the women assert that when they met the Devil he was in the form of a dog, *but rather larger*; he always stood upon his hind legs—probably the man's feet; and, when he shook hands with them, his paw *felt like a hand*—doubtless it *was* a hand. Another suggestion of the Bailiff's is also worth notice. It is that the black ointment so often mentioned as being rubbed on the bodies of the so-called witches, had a real existence, and may have been so compounded as to act as a narcotic or intoxicant, and produce a kind of extatic condition, just as the injection of certain drugs beneath the skin is known to do now. These suggestions are certainly worth consideration as offering reasonable solutions of at least two difficulties connected with those strange and lamentable superstitions. In one way or other there must have been some physical basis for beliefs so widely extended and so terribly real. Imagination, of course, possesses a marvellous power of modification and exaggeration, but still it requires some germs of fact around which to crystallise. And it is to the discovery of the nature of such germs that a careful and conscientious observer will naturally turn his attention.

While speaking of the burning of Witches in Guernsey, [Pg 3] I may also refer for a moment to the three women who, in Queen Mary's reign suffered death by fire, for heresy, because the reason of their condemnation and punishment has caused some controversy, and is often associated in the popular mind with a charge of sorcery. Dr. Heylin in his *Survey* (page 323), says:—

Katherine Gowches, a poor woman of St. Peter-Port, in Guernsey, was noted to be much absent from church, and her two daughters guilty of the same neglect. Upon this they were presented before James Amy, then dean of the island, who, finding in them that they held opinions contrary to those then allowed about the sacrament of the altar, pronounced them heretics, and condemned them to the fire. The poor women, on the other side, pleaded for themselves, that that doctrine had been taught them in the time of King Edward; but if the queen was otherwise disposed, they were content to be of her religion. This was fair but it would not serve; for by the dean

they were delivered unto Helier Gosselin, then bailiff, and by him unto the fire, July 18, 1556. One of these daughters, Perotine Massey, she was called, was at that time great with child; her husband, who was a minister, having in those dangerous times fled the island; in the middle of the flames and anguish of her torments, her belly broke in sunder, and her child, a goodly boy, fell down into the fire, but was presently snatched up by one W. House, one of the by-standers. Upon the noise of this strange incident, the cruel bailiff returned command that the poor infant must be cast again into the flames, which was accordingly performed; and so that pretty babe was born a martyr, and added to the number of the holy innocents.

Parsons, the English Jesuit, has asserted that the women were felons and were executed for theft, while other apologists have described them as prostitutes and generally infamous in character. The original sentences, however, which still exist at the Guernsey *Greffe*, and which I have examined, conclusively settle the question. Both the ecclesiastical sentence, which is in Latin, and the civil sentence, which is in French, distinctly describe the charge as one of *heresy*, and make no mention whatever of any other crime as having aught to do with the condemnation.

It has been questioned too whether a child could be born alive under such circumstances. Mr. F.B. Tupper, in his *History of Guernsey* (page 151), says: "We are assured by competent surgical authority that the case is very possible"; and he further mentions that in a volume entitled *Three Visits to Madagascar*, by the Rev. Wm. Ellis, published in London, in 1858, a precisely similar [Pg 4] case is stated to have occurred in that island. A native woman was burnt for becoming a convert to Christianity, and her infant, born in the flames, was thrust into them again, and burnt also.

Lord Tennyson refers to this Guernsey martyrdom in his historical drama of *Queen Mary* (Act v. Scene iv.). It is night-time in London; a light is burning in the Royal Palace; and he makes two "Voices of the Night" say:—

*First*:—There's the Queen's light. I hear she cannot live.

*Second*:—God curse her and her Legate! Gardiner

burns

Already; but to pay them full in kind,  
The hottest hold in all the devil's den  
Were but a sort of winter; Sir, in Guernsey,  
I watch'd a woman burn; and in her agony  
The mother came upon her — a child was born —  
And, Sir, they hurl'd it back into the fire,  
That, being thus baptised in fire, the babe  
Might be in fire for ever. Ah, good neighbour,  
There should be something fierier than fire  
To yield them their deserts.

With regard to Witchcraft in Jersey, I have not had an opportunity of personally examining the official records there. I find, however, some information on the subject, given by M. De La Croix, in his *Ville de St. Hélier*, and *Les Etats de Jersey*, upon which I have drawn. In the way of legislation, the Guernsey Court does not appear to have promulgated any penal statutes on the subject, being content to treat the crime as one against the common law of the Island. In Jersey on the contrary, Witchcraft was specially legislated against at least on one occasion, for we find that on December 23rd, 1591, the Royal Court of that island passed an Ordinance, of which the following is the purport: —

Forasmuch as many persons have hitherto committed and perpetrated great and grievous faults, as well against the honour and express commandment of God as to the great scandal of the Christian faith, and of those who are charged with the administration of justice, by seeking assistance from Witches and Diviners in their ills and afflictions; and seeing that ignorance is no excuse for sin, and that no one can tell what vice and danger may ensue from such practices: This Act declares that for the time to come everyone shall turn away from such iniquitous and diabolical practices, against which the law of God decrees the same punishments as against Witches and Enchanters themselves; and also in [Pg \*4] order that the Divine Vengeance may be averted, which on account of the impunity with which these crimes have been committed, now threatens those who have the repression of them in their hands. It is, therefore, strictly forbidden to all the inhabitants of this island to

receive any counsel or assistance in their adversities from any Witches or Diviners, or anyone suspected of practicing Sorcery, under pain of one month's imprisonment in the Castle, on bread and water; and on their liberation they shall declare to the Court the cause of such presumption, and according as this shall appear reasonable, shall be dealt with as the law of God directs.

In 1562 two women were executed in Jersey for witchcraft. One of them named *Anne*, a native of St. Brelade's, was burnt at St. Helier's; and the other, *Michelle La Blanche*, expiated her crime at the gibbet of the Hurets, in the parish of St. Ouen, because criminals dwelling on the Fief Haubert de St. Ouen, were, in accordance with custom, required to be executed within the boundaries of the said Fief—seeing that it possessed a gallows-right—and their goods and lands became forfeited to the Seigneur.

In 1583 a rather curious point of law was raised in connection with a pending witch-trial at St. Helier's. On the 15th of February in that year, a suspected witch named *Marion Corbel*, who had been imprisoned in the Castle awaiting her trial, suddenly died. Whereupon her relatives came forward and claimed to be heirs to her goods and chattles, seeing that she had not been convicted of the imputed crime, and urging that her death put an end to further criminal proceedings. The Queen's Procureur, however—it was in the reign of Elizabeth—contended that death was no bar to the completion of the indictment, although it had effectually removed the criminal from the jurisdiction of the Court, as far as punishment was concerned. The very reasonable claim of the deceased woman's relatives was therefore set aside, and the defunct of course being found guilty, her possessions reverted to the crown.

Again, forty years later, in 1623, an old woman of sixty, named *Marie Filleul*, daughter of *Thomas Filleul*, of the parish of St. Clement's, was tried before a jury of twenty-four of her countrymen, and found guilty of the diabolical crime of Sorcery. She was therefore hanged and burnt as a witch, and her goods were confiscated to the King [James I.], and to the Seigneurs to whom they belonged. [Pg 5]

It may be interesting to note here the opinion of Mr. Philippe Le Geyt, the famous commentator on the constitution and laws of Jersey, and one of the most enlightened men of his time, who for many

years was Lieutenant-Bailiff of that island. He was born in 1635 and died in 1715, in his eighty-first year. In Vol. I., page 42, of his works, there occurs a passage of which the following is a translation:—

As Holy Scripture forbids us to allow witches to live, many persons have made it a matter of conscience and of religion to be severe in respect to such a crime. This principle has without doubt made many persons credulous. How often have purely accidental associations been taken as convincing proofs? How many innocent people have perished in the flames on the asserted testimony of supernatural circumstances? I will not say that there are no witches; but ever since the difficulty of convicting them has been recognized in the island, they all seem to have disappeared, as though the evidence of the times gone by had been but an illusion. This shows the instability of all things here below.

Coming down now to within a century ago, we find an article in the *Gazette de Jersey*, of Saturday, March 10th, 1787, complaining of the great increase of wizards and witches in the island, as well as of their supposed victims. The writer says that the scenes then taking place were truly ridiculous, and he details a case that had just occurred at St. Brelade's as corroborative of his assertion. It appears that a worthy householder there, had dreamed that a certain wizard appeared to him and ordered him to poison himself at a date which was specified, enjoining him above all things not to mention the incident to anyone. The poor silly fellow was dreadfully distressed, for he felt convinced that he would have to carry out the disagreeable command. At the same time he was quite unable to keep so momentous a secret to himself, and so he divulged the approaching tragedy to his wife. The good woman's despair was fully equal to his own, and after much anxious domestic counsel they determined to seek the good offices of a White Witch (*une Quéraude*), with the hope that her incantations might overcome the evil spells of the Black Witch who was causing all the mischief. This White Witch prescribed lengthened fasting and other preparations for the great ordeal, and on a given night she [Pg \*5] and the bewitched householder, together with his wife and four or five trusty friends with drawn swords, shut themselves up in a room, and commenced their mysterious ceremonial. There was the boiling of occult herbs; the roasting of a beeve's heart stuck full of nails and pins; the reading of