

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Ulster University		
Unit of Assessment: History (28)		
Title of case study: Unlocking the Hidden Histories of Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 - 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Andrew Sneddon	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer in International History	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2009 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Andrew Sneddon's ground-breaking research on the history of Irish witchcraft and magic has impacted on creativity, culture and society.</p> <p>(I1) Influencing, inspiring and enabling the production of network TV programmes in two territories and multiple languages for national broadcasters BBC and TG4, allowing them to reach new and culturally and linguistically diverse audiences.</p> <p>(I2) Impacting on the ways in which public archives, arts providers and venues in Northern Ireland interpret, preserve and engage with Irish history and heritage, and bring it to the attention of wider audiences.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Between January 2010 and December 2019, while working as a lecturer at Ulster University, Sneddon's research has filled a major lacuna in early modern and modern academic witchcraft studies by unearthing the extent of belief in, and practice of, witchcraft and 'beneficial' magic in Ireland (c.1500-2000). Witchcraft studies has grown exponentially in the last half a century, but Ireland was overlooked primarily because the legal and Church records required to research the subject were destroyed in a fire in the Public Record Office in Dublin in 1922. Painstaking source reconstruction that involved tracking down surviving examples of these documents in archives and libraries in Britain, Ireland and America, along with source substitution using contemporary newspapers, printed books, visual imagery, and objects of material culture, allowed Sneddon to recover an important, 'hidden' part of Irish social and cultural history. The research has appeared in academic monographs and in leading international academic journals. The monograph <i>Witchcraft and Magic</i> [R3] was the first academic overview of Irish witchcraft and popular magic since 1913, while <i>Possessed by the Devil</i> [R1] was the first micro-study of an early modern, Irish mass trial, that of the 'Islandmagee Witches' in 1711.</p> <p>The research made several important discoveries. Belief in magic and witchcraft was revealed as an important part of everyday life for Irish people from the 16th to the 20th century. This was a shared magical culture that traversed traditional religious, political and social fault-lines and helped Irish people in the 19th and early 20th century to negotiate the challenges of modern life. [R1- R5] (2013-2019)</p> <p>Accused witches were revealed by the research as male and female, as were magical practitioners such as fortune tellers, magical healers (who provided charms or cures), and professional cunning folk or service magicians who told fortunes, found lost or stolen goods, and detected, fought, and prevented fairy and witch attacks. The research established a new empirical picture of the witchcraft trials (and a lynching of a witch in Antrim town in 1698), and the legislation (the Irish Witchcraft Act of 1586) and legal processes witches and magical</p>		

practitioners were tried under. It also uncovered the role Protestant Churches had in keeping prosecution rates low in the 17th and 18th centuries before the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1821. [R1- R3] (2013 – 2016)

Ireland's only early modern mass witch trial at Islandmagee in 1711 was located as one of a number of relatively late witch trials that involved demonic possession that spread from Salem Massachusetts in 1692 to lowland Scotland in 1696-1704 and then to Ulster. Research into this landmark event, conducted between 2010 and 2018, established that William Sellor, the ninth Islandmagee witch, was the only man and witch to be executed in Ireland [R1, R5 - R6]. This was shown to have been remembered in the local area up to the twentieth century, in oral tradition and informal commemoration, and linked in the collective memory to a continued belief in witches and witchcraft. Up to the 21st century, the 1711 trial was represented in national public discourse, art and literature as an aberration in a country otherwise free of belief in witches in order to articulate a gendered view of national identity. [R5]

The research demonstrated that accusations continued to be levied in Ireland into the 20th century, long after witchcraft was no longer a crime. By taking matters into their own hands to either enact revenge, gain closure or clear their names, both accusers and suspected witches were often charged with secular crimes such as assault, slander, theft and even murder. This research also demonstrated that magical practitioners were prosecuted in court by disgruntled clients for crimes such as fraud, theft and assault up to the 1920s. [R3, R5]

Finally, an online primary-source 'Reader' was produced containing documents and other forms of evidence relating to belief in ghosts, fairies, the evil-eye, witchcraft and magical healing in Ulster. These sources were selected, edited, annotated, introduced and explained. This Reader revealed the extent to which the supernatural dominated popular culture in Ulster between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and how this belief was represented culturally. (2013-2014) [R6]

3. References to the research

R1: Andrew Sneddon, *Possessed by the Devil: The History of the Islandmagee Witches and Ireland's Only Mass Witchcraft Trial* (History Press, 2013).

<https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/publication/possessed-by-the-devil/9781845887452/>

R2: Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Palgrave, 2015).

<https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230302723>

R3: Andrew Sneddon, 'Medicine, Belief, Witchcraft and Demonic Possession in late Seventeenth-Century Ulster', *Medical Humanities*, 42:2 (2016), pp 1-6.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2015-010830>

R4: Andrew Sneddon, John Fulton, 'Witchcraft, Crime and the Press in Ireland, 1822-1922,' *Historical Journal* 62:3 (2019), pp 741-764. [doi:10.1017/S0018246X18000365](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X18000365)

R5: Andrew Sneddon, 'Witchcraft Belief, Representation and Memory in Modern Ireland', *Cultural and Social History*, 16:3 (2019), pp 251-270.

doi: [10.1080/14780038.2019.1595273](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1595273)

R6: Andrew Sneddon and John Privilege, *The Supernatural in Ulster Scots Literature and Folklore Reader* (2014) <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/history/projects/the-supernatural-in-ulster-scots-literature-and-folklore-project>

R1-R5 The above journal articles and books have been subject to blind peer review practice by internationally-based editorial boards.

R6 was the main output of 'The Supernatural in Ulster Scots Literature and Folklore Project' (2013-4). This project ran from November 2013 to February 2014 and was funded by a grant of GBP8,575 to Dr Sneddon as Principal Investigator, by the Ministerial Advisory Group for the Ulster-Scots Academy (MAGUS) and Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Northern Ireland.

4. Details of the impact

I1: Inspiring, influencing and enabling the production of new network TV programmes in two territories and multiple languages with BBC and TG4

Dr Sneddon's research on witchcraft trials and popular magic inspired, influenced and enabled production companies and broadcasters in Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

to produce the first television programmes on these subjects. The fact that they were recorded in multiple languages (Ulster Scots, English and Irish), and that this was the first time the programmes concerned had tackled the subject of Irish witchcraft, allowed broadcasters to capture new and culturally and linguistically diverse audiences.

Dr Sneddon first brought the hidden history of Irish witchcraft and magic to public attention in March 2011, with a press release detailing his ongoing research and marking the otherwise overlooked 300-year anniversary of Islandmagee witch trial in 1711. He followed the initial media interest in the trial that his press-release had created with a book on the subject. [R1] In Autumn 2013, the publication of the book re-ignited media interest in the history of Irish witchcraft, and this resulted in numerous interviews for newspapers and radio (including *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish Times*, *Sunday Life*, *Irish Independent*, *BBC News*, *BBC Radio Ulster*, *BBC Radio Foyle*). This raising of public awareness of Dr Sneddon's research into Irish witchcraft brought the subject to the attention of television producers between 2013 and 2020.

In October 2014, Sneddon consulted upon content, locations and scripts and appeared on screen in a short film on the 1711 trial for BBC 2 NI's *The Gaitherin*, a programme dedicated to Ulster-Scots heritage, language and culture. The Executive Producer stated she was drawn to filming the story of the Islandmagee witches after reading *Possessed by the Devil* [R1], and that "*this was the first time The Gaitherin dealt with the history of witchcraft and magic in Ireland and Dr Sneddon's research was instrumental to the story, which made it very engaging, yet easy for the viewer to understand.*" She went on to state "*it was crucial we used Andrew Sneddon's research and he should be part of telling that story, in order that we maintain accuracy.*" Furthermore, she noted her "*superiors within the production company (Tern TV) said it was the most well received right across the board and was referred to as one which was a real success.*" [C1].

In 2016 the BBC1 programme *The One Show*, which draws up to 5 million viewers every week, produced a short film on the Islandmagee witchcraft trial that drew extensively upon Sneddon's monograph [R1]. Its producer and director noted that Dr Sneddon's "*contribution was central to the piece*" having used his research and expertise in the script to ensure historical accuracy and to pinpoint historical documents and shooting locations. The film drew directly on Sneddon's underpinning research to establish the main narrative of the case, to detail the backgrounds and physical appearance of the accuser, Mary Dunbar, and the accused witches, and to detail the prosecution and trial process. [C2]

In November 2016, Sneddon was historical consultant and on-screen contributor on a short film and studio discussion piece for Irish language magazine programme, *I Lár an Aonaigh*, on the Islandmagee witchcraft trial, for Below the Radar Productions. The producer and director for the programme stated that, "*I Lár an Aonaigh, is aimed primarily at an Irish speaking audience but it is broadcast on BBC NI at 10pm on a Monday evening as it is a prime time slot and is therefore viewed by a wider audience, Irish and English speaking.*" She went on to say, "*I became interested in the Islandmagee Witch Trials after coming across a story about The Gobbins online. The first source I turned to was Dr Andrew Sneddon's book Possessed by the Devil* [R1] *... I ordered it immediately and read it in one sitting. There is so much helpful information in the book that brought colour to the story. I pitched the story to my superiors and it was a big hit, everyone was enthralled by the story.*" She also stated, "*Dr Sneddon's book helped with the script for the package, giving us great starting points for the questions we asked our contributors, the places we visited and the scripting of the voice over and pieces to camera.*" She further suggested that "*we used the book to help us identify the best places to interview the historian, the local church and the cliff edge. We also used images from the book to visualise the story.*" The producer finished by saying "*this is the first time the Islandmagee Witch Trials, or any witch trials, were discussed in the Irish language on BBC NI*" and the "*executive producers within BBC NI gave it a special mention in their overall feedback of the series.*" [C3]

In October 2019 Waddell Media Productions used the underpinning research [R1, R5] in the making of a programme for the BBC1 Northern Ireland, *Family Footsteps*. In this series, a family

from Bangor, Co. Down were taken on a genealogical detective trail as they pieced together their family tree and discovered life as it would have been for their family members in the past. The third episode centred on the family's ancestor, the Islandmagee 'witch', Janet Latimer. The series producer and director noted that *"this was the first time Waddell Media had engaged with the history of witchcraft and magic in Ireland, and Dr Sneddon's research into the Islandmagee witches influenced and shaped the third episode in the series to a very significant extent."* She went on to state that *"in the initial stages of production the series researcher...made contact with Dr Andrew Sneddon, after reading and acknowledging that his book: Possessed by the Devil ... (2013) [R1] would provide vital evidence and background context to an integral part of the family story."* During production stages, Dr Sneddon *"provided vital research, including a character profile/analysis of the accused witch at the centre of the programme."* Sneddon was instrumental in writing the script for the third episode as this was *"written using Dr Sneddon's research, taking his research and notes to ensure the script would tell the story clearly and accurately to our audience."* Furthermore, *"Dr Sneddon co-operated with the scripting, answered queries from the production, including the producer, assistant producer and researcher, and ensured the facts would be clearly, concisely and correctly presented."* The production was also helped by Dr Sneddon's provision of *"visual imagery of witches including early modern representations, and 19th and 20th century images."* Finally, the director/producer believed Dr Sneddon's on-screen contribution had *"huge benefit to the production, speeded up the research hugely, gave the programme authority and clarity, and helped us present a compelling and robust account of a fascinating historical event to our audience."* The third episode dealing with the Islandmagee witches gained the highest ever audience share of the three episodes with a *"20% local share ... 15% network"*, indicating it was particularly well received by audiences. [C4]

In 2016, Sneddon began working with Lagan Media Productions to produce a six-part series on Irish witchcraft and magic for broadcaster, TG4. This is the first full documentary of its kind in the Irish language and Sneddon's expertise from his underpinning research [R1-R6] influenced and impacted upon Lagan Media to 'pitch', frame, shape and shoot the series. Executive producer for Lagan Media stated, *"[Sneddon] shared his academic knowledge about the history of witchcraft in Ireland"* and was *"attached to the project as an historical researcher/consultant."* As a result of Sneddon's research *"Lagan Media was successful in raising production funds for this series. The total funding raised is GBP334,000 and this healthy budget allows for ... high production values that will draw a broad and wide Irish (North and South) TV audience."* She continued, *"his research helped inform the length of the series and the structure of the series, in particular the key cases that would be examined per episode. I had no prior knowledge of the history of witchcraft in Ireland up to this point so Andrew Sneddon's expertise in this field was crucial as I prepared a 'pitch' in order to raise funds."* During the next three years, as the series was developed before going into production in 2019, Sneddon provided his research and expertise to producers and directors to develop a script and provide historical accuracy with regard dialogue and shooting locations. The executive producer went on to state *"Sneddon also participated as a 'contributor' to this Series and his expertise about Witchcraft in general, and Scotland in particular, was of enormous help to this production, both in front of the camera and behind the camera."* Furthermore, *"during post-production Andrew continues to help, providing assistance in archive research, location archive and most importantly of all as we construct the voice-over, in historical accuracy."* It will be broadcast in Autumn 2021. [C5]

I2: collaboration with museum and arts professionals across Northern Ireland resulting in enhancements to cultural heritage preservation and interpretation of Irish history

The underpinning research has impacted upon public archives and arts providers and venues in Northern Ireland in the way they preserve, interpret and engage with Irish history and heritage and bring it to a wider public audience. It enabled Seedhead Arts to reach new and bigger audiences, promote its brand, and generate the revenue needed to underwrite other parts of its arts programme. For both staff and users of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Dr Sneddon's research has raised awareness of the importance of the archival material it holds relating to the history of the supernatural. It has also helped PRONI increase visitor numbers and re-orientate its public engagement programme to successfully engage with new audiences.

Northern Ireland's chief public archive (PRONI) has been impacted by the underpinning research from 2013-2019, using it to gain increased awareness of its own holdings and of their interest to the general public, and to orientate its outreach programme towards overlooked parts of social history such as the history of witchcraft and magic. In October 2013, PRONI hosted a conference on witchcraft based around the events of the 1711 trial, and due to public demand it was repeated, filmed and repackaged as 'The history, of devil, magic and witchcraft' and hosted on its website. In 2015, PRONI used Sneddon's monograph, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* [R2], to frame its events programme centring on a public conference, 'The Supernatural in the Peripheries: Britain and Ireland'. In October 2019, PRONI used Sneddon's underpinning research [R2, R6] to begin a new Halloween outreach programme, starting with an event that used PRONI's holdings to discuss the popular history of fairies and ghosts. Head of Public Services (HPS) stated "*Archivists at PRONI have drawn upon Dr Sneddon's research to develop and repurpose PRONI's engagement programme, particularly in widening access to archival records for audiences who do not traditionally use record offices.*" He went on to state that "*this programme of events in turn played a key role in contributing to the shaping of how PRONI engages with audiences. These activities marked the first foray PRONI made into exploring the subject of witchcraft and the supernatural, which it would not have been able to do without Dr Sneddon's research.*" HPS stated that "*2013/14 was the first year that a coordinated programme was introduced ... shaped as outlined above by Dr Sneddon's research and this bore immediate results. A new record was set for PRONI visitors in 2013/14 ... 20,318*" and "*a record number of 2,653 visitors ... attended public lectures.*" He continued, "*staff have since recorded a steady increase in research requests relating to witchcraft, popular medicine, and the supernatural. Dr Sneddon's research thereby impacted first on the archive and then on its users.*" HPS finished by stating, "*PRONI is already planning a further supernatural themed public history event for October 2021.*" [C6]

Between 2015 and 2019, Sneddon collaborated with Seedhead Arts (which provides arts consultancy, event management and training services in Northern Ireland) to promote its brand, generate revenue and develop new ways of reaching diverse audiences via NI Arts venue, the Black Box, Belfast. Together they hosted nine public lectures underpinned by Sneddon's research on the trial of the Islandmagee witches [R1], the cultural afterlife of the case [R4], and continued belief in witchcraft and magic in Ireland [R4]. The director of Seedhead Arts stated that the "*Witchcraft lectures are by a considerable distance the most successful events that we've run in the six years we've been doing them ... [and] sell with a ferocity that outstrips ANY of our events across all of our events, (which are many).*" He continued "*Andrew and I have worked on four different lectures, each repeated a number of times, and all of them have sold out ... And to this day it's still the fastest selling event in the history of the venue.*" The director further contended that, "*to date [2015-2019] over 1,100 have attended the lectures, almost none of whom would have been able to engage with the subject but for these events. Feedback has been fantastic and much of the demand comes from return visitors.*" He continued that "*the impact on the business is considerable. Not least financially, these lectures bring in enough income that we can take more risks with the rest of our programming, but also they bring new audiences to our brand ... They show that academics have immense value outside the confines of academia, that people are thirsty for knowledge and that the subject of the History of Witchcraft is one subject which is hugely under-catered for.*" He finished with, "*it feels really important to me that exciting work reaches as wide an audience as possible.*" [C7]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- C1:** Statement from Producer, BBC2 NI 'The Gaitherin'.
- C2:** Statement from Shooting Producer Director, BBC1 'The One Show'.
- C3:** Statement from Producer from Below the Radar TV, BBC2 NI 'I Lár an Aonaigh'.
- C4:** Statement from Series Producer/Director, Waddell Media.
- C5:** Statement from Company Director and Series Producer Lagan Media.
- C6:** Statement from Head of Public Services, PRONI.
- C7:** Statement from Director of Seedhead Arts.