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Spooks and spooks: black magic and bogeymen in Northern Ireland, 1973–74[1]

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On 5 August 1973, the *Sunday News*, published in Belfast, printed an article about the Copeland Islands, a popular spot for day trips and picnics just off the North Down coast. Adorned with drawings of a Baphomet-like goat's head, the headline screamed 'Black Magic Ritual Killings on Copeland Island Beach'. Quoting an anonymous expert on the occult and the local Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Inspector, the story described the purported ritual sacrifice of sheep and the discovery of a symbol-decorated site where a ceremony of some sort had apparently taken place.

On 8 September events took a more sinister turn. The burned and badly mutilated body of ten-year-old Brian McDermott, who had been missing from his home for nearly a week, was retrieved from the River Lagan in Belfast. Within days of his body being found, there were suggestions in the press, referring back to the Copeland Islands incident, that witchcraft might have been involved in the murder.[2]

Between then and the end of 1973, an unprecedented rash of articles referring to local witchcraft, black magic and satanism appeared in the press, north and south of the Irish border. I have located over seventy, unfolding in a spatial and chronological pattern. During the second half of October the stories were concentrated in the south-east of the area: south Down, north Armagh and north Louth. During the first fortnight of November they shifted north and west, to Armagh, south-east Tyrone, Fermanagh, and south and mid-Antrim. During the rest of November and early December they concentrated in mid-Ulster, particularly Tyrone. From an examination of the television news archive index at Broadcasting House, Belfast, there does not seem to have been any noteworthy TV coverage of these matters, at least on the BBC.

A few further stories appeared during early 1974. The most spectacular appeared in March: 'Witchcraft brew found in gruesome ritual cave', relating to a find in Island Magee, Co. Antrim.[3] There were also stories about the film *The Exorcist* – culminating in autumn 1974 when it opened in Belfast – and evangelistic campaigns confronting teenage 'dabbling' in the occult.[4] By

then the episode was over: after that there was only occasional press coverage, such as could be matched anywhere.[5]

Different kinds of press coverage can be identified: reports of apparent specific instances of black magic rituals or whatever,[6] reports of the circulation of local rumours about black magic,[7] articles focusing on the denial of rumours by the police, churchmen or the newspaper itself (which, of course, provided another opportunity to repeat the rumours),[8] editorial comment of various kinds,[9] reports of sermons dealing with the matter,[10] religious advertisements and church notices mentioning these subjects,[11] and readers' letters.[12] Worth mentioning in their own right, as quite distinct from the 'over ground' press, are the, typically Loyalist, paramilitary news-sheets and publications.[13] Finally, there are consistent motifs and themes in the press coverage: the Brian McDermott murder,[14] animal sacrifice, typically involving cats, dogs, sheep and goats,[15] the threat of child abduction (particularly of a blonde, blue-eyed girl),[16] the problem of young people and others experimenting with the occult,[17] and the spoiling, particularly for children, of traditional Hallowe'en celebrations.[18] In one sense, this sequence of, often closely-connected, newspaper stories was the main thing that happened. If that had been *all* that happened, however, this would only be a minor story of troubled times. As I will show, however, there was more to it than that – certainly more than met the eye at the time.

How can we understand what happened?

Social science offers several closely related interpretive frameworks. For example, these events seem to fit the classic pattern of a 'moral panic': a period of sustained public discourse, created and dominated by politicians, the media or other moral entrepreneurs, which creates or dramatizes a particular public issue or problem.[19] Bringing the issue to prominence may resolve, redefine, or consolidate it. A consistent feature of moral panics as they are described in the literature is the illumination or redrawing, through the stigmatization or stereotyping of marginal groups and categories, of collective boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. A sense of 'us' is strengthened by the imagining of 'them' during the collective conjuring of 'folk devils'.

These satanism stories can also be analysed as rumour[20] or 'improvised news':[21] an informal or popular attempt to clarify 'what's going on' in times of ambiguity or uncertainty. When significant matters are not clear, rumour at least is definite enough to fill the vacuum. It is only a short step from rumour to contemporary or urban legends, in which motifs and themes of contemporary concern are articulated and elaborated in oral narratives, which may be worked and reworked versions of long-standing tales.[22] Here, too, imagination colonizes the spaces of uncertainty in everyday life. In this

context, there is evidence of later contemporary legends, particularly in North America, addressing the themes – adolescents and the occult, satanism and child abduction – which the northern Irish rumours of 1973–74 made their own.[23]

Finally, the social anthropological literature on witchcraft and sorcery is also relevant. One influential strand in this analytical tradition argues that accusations, and the symbolism, of supernatural aggression follow and reveal contours of collective and individual tension within groups. They are believed to give voice to, and provide an acceptable vocabulary of blame for, conflicts that cannot easily be expressed, let alone acted on or resolved, in face-to-face communities.[24] In this framework, witchcraft beliefs have been described as a 'social-strain gauge'.[25]

It is easy to criticize these approaches for their explicit or implicit functionalism, in that moral panics, rumours and contemporary legends are believed to express the underlying problems of society, and perhaps to contribute to their solution. It is not, however, productive,[26] and overlooks what these approaches share with some resolutely anti-functionalist approaches to similar topics.[27] In particular, there is a widespread recognition that conflict and violence, ambiguity and uncertainty, are collectively expressed and worked through in narrative and symbolism. Some kind of interpretation along these lines is almost irresistible. Before exploring this further, however, other interpretations of what happened are present in the material itself and are a necessary part of any account of these events.

Was black magic going on?

A rumour with a foundation is quite different from one with none. There are at least three places to look for that foundation. First, Northern Ireland, like many other places, had long played host to muttered intimations of black magic and satanism, supposedly often practised – in best Dennis Wheatley style – by people in high places. There may be more to this than rumour. The peninsula of Islandmagee, in Co. Antrim – source of the last of Ireland's few witchcraft trials, in 1711 – enjoyed a sinister reputation during my childhood in nearby Larne. In October 1961, a collection of occult paraphernalia, apparently disused for some time but seemingly authentic, was discovered in a cave there.[28] In March 1974, a similar find in the same area may, as we shall see below, require a different interpretation. Nevertheless, it is possible that there were practising occultists, if not actual satanists.

There was also the tragic reality of Brian McDermott's murder. This was a killing for which, in the tender innocence of its victim and its savagery, it was difficult to find a place in the local classificatory scheme of violence: 'Even among the black crimes that have been committed in this area in these

last indelible years, the murder of the Belfast child, Brian McDermott, is surely the blackest of them all'.[29] An account that refers to this as a black magic killing was collected by Feldman in the 1980s and the story persists today.[30] However, another, no less persistent, account of Brian McDermott's murder makes a different set of connections: with paramilitary violence and the sexual abuse of children. This was clear at the time, when RUC Assistant Chief Constable William Meharg speculated about a 'sex fiend'[31] or 'juvenile terrorists'.[32] Although no one was arrested for the murder, that the security forces knew the killer but could not prove it has long been believed locally: the individual concerned, now dead, has even been named in print.[33] All of the evidence that I have collected, whether documentary or in interviews, points away from satanism. Even so, it is easy to understand how the murder contributed to the subsequent rumours.

Finally, a persistent theme in the rumours was that teenagers and others were 'dabbling' in the occult, using ouija boards and the like to contact spirits. Putting to one side the specifically local aspects of these stories – particularly attempts to contact the spirits of local people, sometimes paramilitary heroes, who had met violent deaths[34] – there is no reason to doubt that some of this was happening. It went on in my youth, it has been documented elsewhere, and teenagers are still doing it.[35] That pranks and experiments of this kind are common suggests that, in themselves, they do not explain much. Even so, there was at least a small amount of grit around which the imaginings of rumour could accrete. The narrative pearls which subsequently emerged, however, were out of all proportion to any observable reality, and had taken on many different hues. To understand those stories we will have to look elsewhere.

Was something else going on?

Another secret reality may have contributed to the creation and spread of the rumours. On 28 October, the front page of Dublin's *Sunday World* was dominated by a banner headline: 'Black Magic Fear in Two Border Towns'. The story concerned rumours in Dundalk, in the Republic, and Newry, in Northern Ireland, and the supposed ritual sacrifice of a goat in the latter. Some local opinion was reported as suggesting that the Army was spreading these rumours, pointing out that a similar tactic had been used in the campaign against the Mau-Mau in Kenya. Versions of this interpretation of the situation emerged in a couple of other places during the following week.[36]

This theory was elaborated in greater detail in *Republican News* on 24 November. The centre piece of their evidence was the British Army's Brigadier Frank Kitson, a counter-insurgency expert who had recently served in Belfast and written a 'little book' detailing his part in the Mau-Mau campaign,

revealing how accusations against the insurgents of ritual brutality and 'barbaric magic' had been fostered as black propaganda:

> It is not surprising that the same trick should be played on Irish people during their struggle. The British counter-insurgency team has been working very hard on the black magic theme for some time now … their purpose is clear. It is first to suggest that diabolical influences are at work in the freedom struggle … Secondly, it is an attempt to impose a voluntary curfew on the anti-imperialist population and make them live in fear.[37]

Conspiracy theories were two a penny in the North, and at the time this story didn't stand out as more plausible than the rest. However, in 1990 Paul Foot published *Who Framed Colin Wallace?*, about a British Army intelligence officer – a local man – who claimed to have been persecuted following his refusal to spread black propaganda against Labour politicians. Foot described Wallace's 'Information Policy' section, based at Army headquarters, Lisburn, as 'instrumental in setting off the witchcraft hysteria'.[38] This involved the fabrication of supposed black magic ritual sites, complete with black candles and pentacles. According to Wallace in this book, the objectives were to tar paramilitary organizations with the brush of Satan, and to keep young people in at night, particularly in the vicinity of Army observation posts.

I interviewed Colin Wallace in 1993. He described the black magic activities as one aspect, and not the most important, of a wider black propaganda strategy aimed at smearing paramilitary organizations in the eyes of their own supporters as communist, embezzling money, engaged in drug dealing, and linked to satanism. With respect to black magic, the principal tactic was the mock ritual site. He mentioned locations in the Ardoyne in north Belfast, Newry (the episode described in the *Sunday World*), Islandmagee, and another in County Antrim. This activity may have started as early as late 1972, and it continued into early 1974. They did not do many:

> the idea was to create, manufacture a number of situations that then would be reported in the press. But more important, we weren't aiming at briefing the press on this, but the idea was to try to get local people to talk about it in the hope that the fact that sites had been found would generate rumour and give the impression it was much more widespread than it was … one of the things we were trying to do was to blur the edges … In case we came across somebody that was an expert on witchcraft and satanic rites, that any differences in ritual in what we were doing, people would say, oh that's a fake. So we never did anything that was particularly detailed, just left clues that would get people guessing.

Other tactics included briefing enquiring journalists – the anonymous expert on the occult in the Copelands Island report in August 1973 was probably an intelligence officer – and placing fake religious advertisements[39] and readers' letters in the press.[40] Wallace could not remember the Copeland

Island incident, although there is evidence to suggest that it was a deliberate hoax.[41] He was also definite that there was no direct connection between the black propaganda and the Brian McDermott murder. Stories about sacrificed dogs and cats may have had a different Army source: local knowledge insists that some units killed dogs and cats, to make their patrols quieter and terrorize the neighbourhood.

Wallace wanted to create something that would develop and spread on its own. To this end, he drew on his knowledge of his own background. So, although the campaign was aimed at both communities, it was perhaps aimed more at Protestants than Catholics. He mentioned several sources for the basic idea and the detail: his grandmother's supernatural tales during his childhood in Randalstown, Co. Antrim, newspaper coverage of a case in Britain at this time, and a few books, such as Montague Summers's *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*. Although he knew Kitson's books, he did not remember them, or Kitson himself, influencing this project. Looking at the two relevant books (Kitson 1960, 1971), and a later Kitson text on counter-insurgency (1977), this is not surprising.[42] Although Kitson discusses the role of 'pseudo Mau-Mau' under Army control, and says that they had to administer the occasional 'Mau-Mau oath' in order to maintain their cover, he nowhere says that his 'counter-gangs' carried out atrocities or rituals to blacken the name of the Mau-Mau. Kitson writes about those things only as authentic Mau-Mau behaviour. While the *Republican News* and the *Sunday World* got the basic story right, the reference to Kitson is wrong (and we are entitled to ask where the information came from).

Can Wallace's account be trusted? He is an ex-member of an occupational community of professional liars, so we should entertain doubt. However, I am inclined to believe him, if not on the fine detail – he insisted that the passage of time had rendered his memory unreliable – then with respect to the larger picture. I have several reason for my confidence. First, I revealed nothing of what I had already discovered until we had exhausted what he knew. Only then did I produce various press cuttings as prompts to further discussion. Second, his tale didn't appear slick or rehearsed. His testimony was full of the inconsistencies and contradictions that might be expected from someone remembering events which occurred amid the hurley-burley of many other things, twenty years earlier. Finally, a number of points of detail, which he got more or less right, suggested that he knew what he was talking about. There were also enough things of which he denied knowledge to reinforce that judgement.

On balance, therefore, it is plausible that the Army played a part in starting and encouraging the rumours. This is a useful reminder that conspiracy theories should not always be dismissed: in this case, it seems that there was a conspiracy. But we still need to ask why this particular

disinformation 'took off' to the extent that it did. To answer that question we must explore a range of other issues.

The role of the newspapers

Local newspapers fed the flames in several respects. First, some journalists seem to have been very reliant on official sources for information: the 'anonymous expert' in the Copeland Islands story is but one example. It is, of course, true that in many cases those official sources, in the shape of the police in particular, were denying the witchcraft stories. In other cases, however, they were not. While it is possible to sympathize with the difficulties faced by journalists in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, some seem to have been too close to their official sources for comfort. Disinformation readily found its way into print. Wallace and his colleagues also planted bogus readers' letters and other decoys in the press. In December 1973, for example, an advertisement appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *News Letter*, and local papers elsewhere in the Province:

> PROTESTANTS AWAKE!!
>
> Politicians and others have lied and deceived. (And lies permit entrance to evil spirits, Eph. 4: 25, 27. Is this why there is a fearful increase of witchcraft in Ireland, North and South?).
> WE HAVE BEEN BETRAYED INDEED.[43]

Unusual in that it was published on a weekday, and does not identify its source or sponsor, this 'advertisement' is black propaganda in action.

Over-reliance on official sources is but one symptom of shoddy journalism. Particularly, although not exclusively, in the very local, small-town papers, there sometimes also seems to have been a credulity – or at least a preparedness to print anything for a 'good story' – that is remarkable. A significant part of this problem were those local papers which were owned by the same Province-wide group, and appear to have been poorly resourced in terms of news journalism. In these papers, the same story could appear in a number of towns over a period of weeks. One such story appeared in the *Ballymena Chronicle and Antrim Observer*, 8 November 1973:

> WITCHCRAFT RUMOURS DISTRESS PARENTS
>
> Rumours about witchcraft now rife in Mid-Ulster, are terrifying children and causing grave concern to parents.
>
> Stories circulating all over the country claim that witchcraft is being practised in some areas and that a blonde, blue-eyed girl, aged from between three and eleven, is to be abducted this weekend for use in a black magic ritual.
>
> Frightened parents are now keeping their children indoors after school

> because of the fear that those engaged in the witchcraft practice might lure youngsters away. In some instances parents are accompanying their children to and from school.
>
> Teachers in some schools have warned children to be careful about accepting lifts or talking to strangers in the streets. They have also advised their pupils to stay in their homes after darkness falls.
>
> Meanwhile the rumours continue abated and gain greater significance as each new detail is added.

This is identical in every respect to items which had appeared in the *Dungannon Observer*, the *Mid-Ulster Observer* and the *Fermanagh News* the previous Saturday, 3 November. If nothing else in the story, one should be sceptical of the precision of 'this weekend'. All of these titles were owned by Observer Newspapers (NI), Dungannon. Given journalism of this calibre, it is little wonder that rumour spread (or at least appeared to).

Other examples of the 'wandering story' phenomenon could be cited – and not all from the Observer group – but this example is interesting because in Ballymena at that time three papers were battling to survive. The witchcraft rumours became part of this struggle; in the process they were dramatized and consolidated. The following Thursday, 15 November, the *Ballymena Guardian and Antrim Standard*, the closest competition to the *Chronicle*, went on to the offensive on its front page. The article begins with an introduction which sets the national scene and denies the truth of such rumours:

> TOWNS IN GRIP OF BLACK MAGIC FEAR
>
> Many people are alarmed at what is supposed to be going on and some are indeed frightened almost to the stage of panic.
>
> Indeed one such couple called at our Ballymena office last Friday afternoon. They had read a report in a weekly newspaper about Black Magic and arrived at the conclusion that since a story had got into print there was perhaps truth behind the other tales they had heard.
>
> The young parents – they had a charming little blond [*sic*] girl with them in a pram – came to us to ask if we had any definite proof that such wicked things as they had been told of were in fact happening in the area.
>
> DEEPLY AFFECTED
>
> Obviously deeply affected by what she had heard, the young mother volunteered the information that only that day a pupil at a local school had been kidnapped and the police were searching for her.
>
> A quick telephone to the local police while the mother was still in the office confirmed that such was not in fact the case.
>
> Pity others would not try to kill such stories at source.

The article concludes by emphasizing the absence of evidence for rumours in Antrim and Ballymena, and encouraging readers to question strange tales

before repeating them: 'No doubt it is comfort of some sort to be able to say one is not the lie-maker, but even to be the lie-teller in the light of current feeling should be a heavy burden on each man's conscience.' The target – the *Chronicle* – could not be clearer. The same day, the town's long-established *Ballymena Observer*, without alluding to the *Chronicle*'s original story of the week before, also printed a story that detailed local rumours and denied their basis in fact.

Thus newspapers contributed to the situation as conduits for disinformation, in the low standard of evidence which sometimes seems to have been required to make a story, in the recycling of stories around the province, and in the familiar journalistic imperative, to print something – anything almost – when everyone else was on to the story.[44] The press coverage, rather than reflecting or documenting what happened in some straightforward sense, is thus, at least in part, actually 'what happened'. It was certainly influential in creating anxieties and rumours which, at the time, were real for some people.

External influences?

Local interest in the occult, the scattered activities of the Army, and amplification by the local press do not explain everything. For example, where did the story about the sacrifice of blonde, blue-eyed children come from? Were there external sources for these stories and images?

Returning to Colin Wallace, his remark during the interview about a case in Britain suggests a number of possibilities. The 'Highgate Vampire' case, which came to trial in June 1974, had been in and out of the newspapers for years.[45] Wallace may have had in mind other newspaper reports.[46] Black magic and the desecration of churchyards were matters of public discussion. A more general set of influences, mentioned in the Northern Irish press coverage of *The Exorcist*,[47] is the ready local availability of literature on the occult. Less esoteric popular authors such as Dennis Wheatley – *The Satanist*, *To the Devil – A Daughter*, *The Devil Rides Out*, and so on – and horror films were also obvious inspirations for the imagery of the Black Mass, the sacrificial virgin, demonic goats, and the like.

The United States might also have been a source. *Rosemary's Baby* was a cinema hit in 1968, and *The Exorcist* was contemporary with the end of the period under discussion here. In 1973 the evangelist Maurice Cerullo published *The Back Side of Satan*, an early text for the growing new-right, Christian anti-satanism campaign that contributed during the 1980s to the creation of a moral panic about satanic abuse.[48] There were rumours the same year about cattle mutilation, often attributed to satanists, in the American mid-west.[49] A satanism rumour in Idaho in November 1973 was followed in 1974 by similar rumours in Montana, both featuring the abduction and murder of a virgin girl child.[50] These could have provided grist for the

northern Irish rumour mill, but I have seen no evidence to suggest this. If anything, the northern Irish rumours are evidence in support of Ellis's argument that current American anti-satanist mythologies derive originally from Britain. While it is true that 'satanic abuse' is an American invention, subsequently imported to Britain, the local roots of the northern Irish rumours require emphasis, as does their early appearance.[51]

Ritual murder

One of those roots directs our attention back to the press. Black magic sacrifice was not the only kind of 'ritual killing' which was in the news in Northern Ireland at this time. Between 1972 and 1974, Belfast, in particular, was the arena for a campaign of random assassination, mainly by members of Protestant paramilitary organizations, which at its height saw bodies being discovered almost daily. In 1972 alone, 121 murders were classified as assassinations, two-thirds of the victims being Catholic.[52] That is an imprecise statistic, but it makes the point.

Whether this was a co-ordinated, deliberate strategy or not, it was effective in terrorizing large areas of Belfast, especially at night.[53] Most victims were shot, but a small number were tortured, mutilated or disfigured – signs of the cross being cut on their body, for example – and/or stabbed to death, often with notable savagery. These murders were the work of Protestants. In response, two local journalists on *The Belfast Telegraph*, Martin Dillon and Denis Lehane, began to write about 'ritual killings', culminating in the publication on 25 October 1973 of their book, *Political Murder in Northern Ireland*. Although Dillon later identified some of these 'ritual' murders as the early handiwork of Lenny Murphy, leader of the 'Shankill Butchers',[54] the earlier book focused on a juvenile gang based in East Belfast, led by the man whose name has been persistently linked to the Brian McDermott murder.[55]

According to Dillon and Lehane the 'ritual killings' began as early as May 1972, with a murder which was significant for 'the use of the knife and the fact that the killing involved a ritual in which more than one person used the knife on the victim'.[56] Just before the witchcraft rumours began to circulate, on 26 June 1973, the double murder of Catholic politician Paddy Wilson and Irene Andrews was widely reported as involving horrific multiple knife wounds. In a newspaper interview that July, this killing was described as a 'ritual killing' by a man claiming to represent the Ulster Freedom Fighters, the group claiming responsibility.[57]

Whether Dillon and Lehane were correct in their characterization either of particular murders, or of the relentless toll of assassination victims, is not the point. What matters is that in their journalism, and the book, they tapped into or established a public discourse about 'ritual killings': killings which

were actually happening, with the corpses to prove it. Furthermore, the assassinations themselves, combined with press comment of this kind, created a powerfully sinister local atmosphere of uncertainty, menace and mystery. Combined with the Brian McDermott murder, it is not surprising that fears of another kind of ritual killing were credible to at least some people. The possibility was not wholly outlandish.

An enchanted world: 'traditional' belief

Colin Wallace also mentioned the supernatural stories that his grandmother had told him as a child. With respect to 'traditional' folk belief, one of the most striking things about this pattern of rumours and newspaper stories is their timing. They cluster around Hallowe'en, the 31 October: thirty-three of the relevant newspaper items fall into the four-week period, 18 October to 14 November.

Some of these mention Hallowe'en, particularly with respect to the witchcraft rumours spoiling the 'traditional fun' of the festival. What was that traditional fun? One of the best-documented northern Irish calendar festivals, Hallowe'en was and is celebrated by Catholics and Protestants.[58] During my childhood in Co. Antrim in the 1960s it involved bonfires, fireworks, dressing up in 'false faces' (grotesque masks), playing 'Hallowe'en knock' – a distant relative of 'trick or treat' – around the doors, games such as bobbing for apples, fortune-telling, and food. And we knew that it was about witches and ghosts, even though it may be more closely identified with the fairies in tradition.[59] It was a supernatural moment, a moment not just for fun, but also of other-worldly power and a frisson of fear, even if we didn't *completely* believe in it. This is no doubt why it has long featured in American satanism rumours and legends.[60]

Satanic rumours notwithstanding, local newspapers at this time were also full of lighthearted features about the 'traditional' trappings of Halloween: festive recipes, communal parties and bonfires, ghost stories, and so on.[61] Not all of the trappings, perhaps – fireworks had been banned three years earlier, not wholly successfully, by the Explosions (Control of Fireworks) Order – but the festival was still very much in evidence. Nowhere in this kind of coverage were black magic rumours mentioned. Kids, too, were still up to their usual tricks, despite the rumours. In Portadown, for example, at the heart of the 'rumour area' at this time, two teenagers were caught by the police, dressed in a sheet, 'spooking' motorists on the Tandragee Road.[62] Similarly, the field archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum contain a delightful 1976 account of a Hallowe'en play, complete with witches, devised by a twelve-year-old girl from Newtownards, Co. Down and her friends.[63] This material warns us against presuming that people were 'in the grip' of either a pervasive fear about witches and black magic, or unofficial

beliefs – 'superstition' – more generally. They clearly were not. *At most* this was a partial and uneven phenomenon.

However, this is not the whole picture either. There are other indications that in Northern Ireland at the time many people actively believed – or at least *half*-believed – in the presence or proximity of another world, enchanted in one way or another. There were, for example, newspaper articles and advertisements devoted to 'healers', whether they were explicitly Christian[64] or something else, 'traditional' or otherwise.[65] This too is well documented.[66] During the early 1970s Danny Gallagher, a 'seventh son of a seventh son', in competition with another of that ilk, Finbarr Nolan, was attracting significant crowds to healing sessions all round the North. In an advertisement that appeared in various versions in local papers during 1973 and 1974, Gallagher, describing himself as a 'faith healer', reminded readers that 'Persons requiring treatment are requested to bring earth from the grave of a relative or clergyman'.[67] It is denying the testimony of the evidence *not* to see this as magical (although nor should we necessarily presume the faith of those who turned up to be healed).

An enchanted world: symbolizing 'the trouble'

Ghosts and fairies also make their appearance in the newspapers at this time. The *Strabane Chronicle* and the *Ulster Herald*, for example, both carried, on 6 October 1973, the same article about a man whose house in Corbally, Co. Tyrone, was apparently plagued by the fairies. While the fairies may be a belief whose time had passed – and this story thus exceptional – ghosts were, and are, a different matter.

The 'Troubles' in the North since 1969 have produced ghost legends which dramatize and memorialize the death and violence of the times. On All Soul's Day 1973, the day after Hallowe'en, there was, for example, an enigmatic story about the suppression of a ghost story by 'Dublin security chiefs' who were worried that 'IRA terrorists' would exploit it.[68] Other stories are more clearly based in events. One of the better known examples of this genre concerns the eighteen soldiers who were blown up at Warrenpoint in 1979: newspaper reports began to emerge the following year about 'the ghostly patrol which appears from nowhere, stops cars, vanishes into the night without trace'.[69] The field recording archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum contain a number of 'troubles'-related ghost and banshee stories and others have been published.[70] Burton's ethnography of the Ardoyne, north Belfast, during 1972–73, mentions local ghost stories, suggesting that 'the troubles increase the probability of such tales becoming conversational currency'.[71] Feldman, too, documents ghost stories as the 'genealogies of the dead': 'In the community where these stories were collected, the intensified presence of ghosts since the advent of the Troubles is

attributed to the sheer frequency and randomness of violent death within a limited space and time'.[72]

The message is clear: the violence and emotion of the Troubles find expression in narrative and the symbolic domain. Another striking example of this is 'The Black Man', who, to my knowledge, first appears in print in Morris Fraser's *Children in Conflict* (1974). Fraser, a child psychiatrist, presents the case of 'Anne', an eleven-year old from the Lower Falls area of Belfast, who began to experience hallucinations in late 1969. When he saw her in 1971: 'She said that the figure she saw was a tall man in a big hat, brightly coloured coat and frightening eyes. He varied in size from being only a couple of inches high to being "ten times as big as a house". He was, she said, a Protestant, because he was evil and trying to kill her … Sometimes he whispered to her and told her to do "bad things".' [73] For Fraser this was a matter of dealing with trauma through projection and displacement, drawing on the historical imagery of the Devil.[74]

Be that as it may, it was not to be an isolated phenomenon. In October 1972, a year before the rumours which we have so far been discussing, the youngsters of the Catholic area of the Ardoyne were full of stories about a 'Black Man' who stalked the streets after dark. Pictures drawn by local informants of his close relative, 'the Big Man of Arden Street', complete with banshees and witches,[75] show a clear relationship to Anne's hallucinations (not to mention anticipating Freddy Kruger by more than a decade). For a fortnight before Hallowe'en, the area was full of stories about black magic and the Black Man. Drawing in the Catholic Church, Protestants and the British Army, these talked of butchered dogs, black candles, upside-down crosses and victims of violence coming back to life.[76] Largely a discourse of young people, some scoffed openly at the rumours, others went to the priest for holy water. The rumours died away soon after Hallowe'en, and Burton interprets them as youthful pranks, an excuse for boys to leave girls at home.

In the context of Fraser's account of 'Anne', and Colin Wallace's identification of the Ardoyne as one of the Army's phony satanist sites, Burton's is not a sufficient explanation (although there is doubtless something in it). This view is reinforced by Feldman's evidence that 'Black Man' stories – once again drawing upon motifs of butchered pets, the Army, and satanic ritual – were still current in the mid-1980s.[77] Feldman's explanation of these stories is that they both reflect the actual counter-insurgency tactics of the British Army's Parachute Regiment and are a 'cultural elaboration of terror', a symbolic reworking of violence and its practitioners.

The 'Black Man' genre means two things in the context of this chapter. First, stories about black magic and sacrificed pets were current as a collective discourse in the Ardoyne a good year before they begin to show up in the newspapers. This adds credence to Colin Wallace's testimony, and suggests the possibility that such tales may have been a source on which the Army

black propagandists drew. Second, with ghost stories and the like, they are further evidence of an enchanted universe within which the Troubles were experienced and interpreted, and within which the black magic rumours circulated and found a degree of credence.

An enchanted world: religion

Northern Ireland in 1973–74 was far removed from the disenchantment that Max Weber predicted as the miserable fate of scientific, rationalized modernity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in organized religion, the most important symbolic and moral framework within which political violence was and is interpreted: Northern Ireland is by any yardstick – observance, belief, or attitudes – a very religious place.[78]

The general point about religiosity applies to both Protestants and Catholics. However, with a few exceptions – an editorial in *The Derry Journal* inspired by the Brian McDermott murder and dramatizing the 'flood gates of evil' which the Troubles had opened,[79] and some anti-rumour preaching and comment by Catholic clergy[80] – the religious discourse about satanism is largely Protestant. Colin Wallace thought that, on balance, Protestants were the primary target. On balance, he may have been right. Protestant worries about these matters surface in the early 1970s, with the publication of *The Dark Arts in Bible Light* by W. J. McK. McCormick.[81] While this also lambasted idolatry, 'spiritism', Freemasonry and hypnotism, a good part of the book is devoted to a scriptural attack on occultism and magic. The real target, however, is probably Roman Catholicism more than satanism.[82] In response to the Brian McDermott murder, we find a distinctly liberal Protestant discourse about moral decline, evil and the 'Troubles', linked also to the possibility of collective social and political redemption; Ian Paisley's fundamentalist *Protestant Telegraph*, however, made sectarian political capital out of the tragedy.[83]

Probably more to the point is the concentration of the rumours in south Down, Armagh, and mid-Ulster. These are marginal farming areas, socially conservative and economically disadvantaged, with long histories of inter-ethnic conflict, where fundamentalist Protestantism and loyalism bump right up against Catholicism and militant republicanism. This is Northern Ireland's 'Bible belt'. Banbridge is at this area's heart, so it is interesting to read contemporary accounts of the Rev. Samuel Workman's 'Special Evangelical Mission' to Scarva Street Presbyterian Church, Banbridge. Beginning on 21 October 1973, this was extended due to popular demand to 16 November, when extra seating had to be installed to accommodate the throng.[84]

The Outlook, published in nearby Rathfriland, carried an account on 2 November 1973 of 'Belfast preacher on Black Magic and Armageddon':[85] the Rev. Workman had preached a 'challenging and startling sermon on "the

last days"'. After discussing the Middle East and the Common Market, he posed the question – drawing on 1 Tim. 4: 1, on the 'the latter days' – 'what makes anybody think that satanic activity can be safely dismissed as nothing more than human addiction to rumour-mongering and proneness to credulity?' The theme of black magic was elaborated further in a long piece entitled 'The Black Art', which may have been the text of a sermon, contributed the same day to the *Banbridge Chronicle* by the Rev. J. T. Hagen, the minister of Scarva Street Presbyterian Church:

> there is in our day a real revival of the black art and other associated evils. Much of the difficulty, trouble and evil in the world today is caused by the devil … The devil is real and devil worship is real. There are those who are selling their very souls to satan. There are those who are being robbed of their peace and very sanity because of this evil. Two forces are at work in our world, the forces of Christ and the forces of the devil. The forces of the devil are out to destroy and bring misery and unhappiness, the forces of the Lord Jesus Christ are out to bring peace.[86]

This brief extract lets us taste something of the atmosphere of a packed soul-saving mission meeting, and the preaching about black magic that went on there. Some people, fundamentalist Protestants, were taking the matter very seriously.

The Outlook's report suggests that more than black magic was being taken seriously. For some this was a time of heightened religious fervour and foreboding. This is also clear from the, solely Protestant, church notices and announcements in the Saturday edition of the *Belfast Telegraph*. Sampling the months of September, October and November, in 1971 there were on average 8.57 broadsheet columns of Church notices every week; in 1972 this was 8.32, rising to 10.21 in 1973, 10.25 in 1974, and falling back to 8.96 in 1975. Nor is it simply a matter of level of enthusiasm. The themes dramatized in these advertisements for special meetings and crusades are also significant. For some Northern Irish Protestants, millenarianism was in the air in the autumn of 1973, and Armageddon was on the horizon if not actually being played out then and there. The 'end times' and the 'last days' are consistent themes, their signs and portents, drawing on interpretations of the Book of Revelations and other Biblical sources, being the entry of the UK into the European Common Market in 1972, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, and the Northern Ireland conflict itself.[87]

It is not original to observe that uncertainty, masked by an apparently rock-solid, inflexible confidence in their own righteousness, characterizes Ulster Protestants.[88] This view resonates here because, in part, the black magic rumours can be interpreted as a Protestant discourse about moral uncertainty, about the overturning of an established and axiomatic moral order that had been manifest in the Northern Irish state and the Protestant

way of life. This is particularly so with respect to the murder of Brian McDermott, almost certainly committed by Protestants but impossible to 'own up to' within local canons of acceptable violence. It is also so with respect to the assassinations, particularly the 'ritual murders': guns are one thing, knives are another. The killings may have been done in the name of Protestantism, but not all Protestants could accept or acknowledge them.

This uncertainty should also be understood in the context of the prorogation of the local parliament, Stormont, by the British government in December 1972. The Protestants' bulwark, and the source of the legitimacy of their local sovereignty, had been removed at a stroke. Further themes, which emerged in the black magic rumours and the church material, and which there is no space to discuss here, mingle in drugs and sex. These dramatize the equally abrupt modernization of Protestant Ulster, and the corruptions of permissiveness – tame though they appear in retrospect – which were enthusiastically embraced by a younger generation who saw the outside world on television and wanted a life different from that of their parents. The Protestants of the 'Bible belt' weren't just threatened by Popery and Republicanism, they were also threatened by the God-less English, who would happily sell them down the river, and, from within, by their own children. It is perhaps little wonder that a dominant motif in the rumours was the threatened child.

Why did the rumours stop?

Although there is no defining moment, by the early months of 1974 the episode was effectively over. There were a few articles on witchcraft and black magic in the Northern Ireland press during this period, but nothing more. They were either probable Army disinformation [89] or reports of evangelistic attempts to capitalize on the issue.[90] After March 1974 no more rumours of the type discussed in this chapter appeared in the press: the issue was dead. Why?

The most obvious answer is that rumour needs something on which to feed and nothing actually 'happened'. Fears about the abduction of a child for sacrifice, for example, can only remain current so long in the absence of at least an attempt to snatch someone's son or daughter. Facts are not everything in these matters, but they do matter. Furthermore, such 'evidence' as there was evaporated when it was examined. The Copelands Island episode, for example, had been publicly disproved, and in detail, by the end of September 1973.[91] Similarly, 'the sudden appearance' in Banbridge at the end of October 'of a black circle which was found burned on land near a spot named Solitude', apparently turned out to have been caused by horses, exercised on a lunging rein.[92] Millenarian prophecy and portent also needed something concrete to feed them: the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war in

Israeli victory – not to mention the more general reluctance of Armageddon to materialize – took some of the wind out of those who saw themselves as living in the 'last days' (for the moment anyway).

The final answer is that during the spring of May 1974, both the press and Army intelligence had other, if not better, things on which to concentrate. Loyalist resistance to the cross-community, power-sharing Executive – the British attempt to fill the local political vacuum created by the demise of Stormont and provide a basis for non-sectarian politics – was gathering and organizing. William Craig was reviewing fascist-style parades and adopting apocalyptic rhetoric, Ian Paisley was marching and fulminating, and there was conflict and discord within the Unionist Party. Alliances and marriages of convenience were forged between Protestant trade unionists, paramilitary organizations and politicians. Plans were laid against a backdrop of continuing violence.

In two weeks during May 1974 those plans came to fruition in the Ulster Workers Council strike. The immediate upshot of the strike was the collapse of the Executive, and, in the face of Harold Wilson's misjudged televised accusation of 'spongeing', the opening up of a consensual ground upon which a wide range of Protestant opinion could meet to assert itself and oppose the present state of affairs. In the medium term, Protestants reasserted their local power and forged a new relationship with Britain. They were back inside the gates again, which suggests a final answer to my question. If the witchcraft rumours were nurtured by a crisis of confidence within the Northern Irish Protestant community, the easing of that crisis will have made a difference.

Understanding what happened

The black magic rumours were not a moral panic in the classic sense, if only because there were few if any clear-cut moral entrepreneurs. Colin Wallace clearly doesn't count, and the newspapers followed rather than led the way in this matter. Other than in the limited operations of the Army, there doesn't seem to have been an organized or co-ordinated plan of campaign on the part of anyone. The word 'panic' is, anyway, an over-statement: many people disregarded the rumours or simply laughed at them. Many more probably only believed in them occasionally, in the dark. While the evidence from Banbridge leaves no doubt that many others *did* believe in the possibility of satanists and devil worship, and the reality of Satan, ordinary life went on all around them.

To understand what happened we must appreciate the coming together of a number of factors: the reality of occultism, however trivial or rare; the Brian McDermott murder; the Army's disinformation tactics; local journalism and newspaper practices; external influences; public discourse about 'ritual'

assassinations; the everyday reality of an enchanted world which combined 'traditional folk belief', the symbolized expression and working-through of terror and violence, and fundamentalist, millenarian Protestantism; and a crisis of morale and moral confidence within the Protestant community. Thus the black magic rumours open a privileged window on to a revealing and unique moment in the north of Ireland's recent history. If we are to understand the view through that window, light must be brought to bear on the matter from a range of different directions.[93] In return, the story casts its own light into other dark corners.

Notes

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2 BNL and IN, 11 Sep. 1973. The following abbreviations will be used: BNL, *Belfast News Letter*; BT, *Belfast Telegraph*; IN, *Irish News*; IT, *Irish Times*; SN, *Sunday News*; SW, *Sunday World* (Dublin).

3 *East Antrim Times*, 8 March 1974.

4 See, BT 4 March 1974; SN 31 March 1974; SN 24 Apr. 1974; BNL 22 Oct. 1974; BT 22 Oct. 1974; BT 23 Oct. 1974; BT 24 Oct. 1974; BT 25 Oct. 1974; BNL 29 Oct. 1974; BT 29 Oct. 1974; BT 2 Nov. 1974.

5 There are occasional press stories, not all of which are reporting local stories, covering such matters. For example, BT 16 July 1975; BNL 23 March 1977; BNL 19 Sep. 1987; BNL 25 Jan. 1988; IT 12 March 1988; IT 14 March 1988; BNL 19 Sep. 1988; BNL 25 Sep. 1988; IN 1 Nov. 1989; BNL 3 May 1990; BT 19 Sep. 1991; SW 25 July 1993; BT 2 Oct. 1993; *Sunday Life* 17 Oct. 1993.

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9 See, *Derry Journal* 14 Sep. 1973; *Protestant Telegraph* 15 Sep. 1973.

10 See, *Banbridge Chronicle* 2 Nov. 1973; *The Outlook* (Rathfriland) 2 Nov. 1973; *The Argus* (Drogheda and Dunkalk) 2 Nov. 1973.

11 See, BT 12 Dec. 1973; BT 13 Dec. 1973; BT 14 Dec. 1973; BT 15 Dec. 1973.

12 See *Lurgan and Portadown Examiner* 8 Nov. 1973; *Armagh Observer* 10 Nov. 1973; *Fermanagh News* 10 Nov. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 38 (mid Nov.).

13 See *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 32 (Sep. 1973); *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 35 (mid Oct. 1973); *Ulster Loyalist* 15 Nov. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 38 (mid Nov.); *Republican News* 24 Nov. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 42 (mid Dec.).

14 See *Derry Journal* 14 Sep. 1973; *Protestant Telegraph* 15 Sep. 1973; BT 22 Sep. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 32 (Sep. 1973); *Evening Press* (Dublin) 1 Oct. 1973; *Sunday Press* (Dublin) 14 Oct. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 35 (mid Oct. 1973); SN 28 Oct. 1973; *Dungannon News and Tyrone Courier* 31 Oct. 1973; *Ulster Star* (Lisburn) 2 Nov. 1973; *Sunday Citizen* 4 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Guardian* 15 Nov. 1973; *East Antrim Times* 16 Nov. 1973.

15 For example, *Evening Press* (Dublin) 1 Oct. 1973; BNL 2 Oct. 1973; *Sunday Press* (Dublin) 14 Oct. 1973; BNL 16 Oct. 1973; *Irish Independent* (Dublin) 16 Oct. 1973; *WDA News* vol. 1 no. 35 (mid Oct. 1973); *Lurgan Mail* 25 Oct. 1973; *Banbridge Chronicle* 26 Oct. 1973; *Mourne Observer* 26 Oct. 1973; SN 28 Oct. 1973; SW 28 Oct. 1973; *Portadown Times* 31 Oct. 1973; *Lurgan Mail* 1 Nov. 1973; *Armagh Guardian* 1 Nov. 1973; *Ulster Gazette and Armagh Standard* 1 Nov. 1973; BNL 2 Nov. 1973; *Ulster Star* (Lisburn) 2 Nov. 1973; *Northern Standard* (Monaghan) 2 Nov. 1973; *Dundalk Democrat and People's Journal* 3 Nov. 1973; *Sunday Citizen* 4 Nov. 1973; *Carrickfergus Advertiser* 8 Nov. 1973; *Dungannon Observer* 10 Nov. 1973; *Fermanagh News* 10 Nov. 1973; *Ulster Loyalist* 15 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Guardian* 15 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Observer* 15 Nov. 1973; *Impartial Reporter* (Fermanagh) 22 Nov. 1973; *Fermanagh Herald* 24 Nov. 1973; *Republican News* 24 Nov. 1973; BNL 7 Feb. 1974; *Sunday Press* (Dublin) 24 Nov. 1974.

16 For example, *Irish Independent* (Dublin) 16 Oct. 1973; BNL 23 Oct. 1973; *Lurgan Mail* 25 Oct. 1973; *Mourne Observer* 26 Oct. 1973; SW 28 Oct. 1973; *Dungannon News and Tyrone Courier* 31 Oct. 1973; *Northern Standard* (Monaghan) 2 Nov. 1973; *Dungannon Observer* 3 Nov. 1973; *Fermanagh News* 3 Nov. 1973; *Mid-Ulster Observer* 3 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Chronicle and Antrim Observer* 8 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Guardian* 15 Nov. 1973; *Ballymena Observer* 15 Nov. 1973; *East Antrim Times* 16 Nov. 1973; BT 23 Nov. 1973.

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91 BT 24 Sep. 1973; *County Down Spectator* 28 Sep. 1973.
92 SN 28 Oct. 1973; BNL 19 Nov. 1974.
93 For examples of similarly multi-factorial interpretations of early modern witchcraft episodes, see J. Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982) and A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London, 1970).