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Digital Humanities

Data Biography: Survey of Scottish Witchcraft

Early modern Scotland was full of witchcraft and its associated trials. While scholars have been studying Scottish witch trials and compiling relevant data for decades, in the late 1990s, four researchers realized that they could discover more and improve the accessibility of that information for use in humanistic study. The researchers hoped to “dramatically add to the range of information available about [witches]” and use new database technology to process the information in sophisticated ways.[[1]](#footnote-1) Out of these desires, The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft was born.

The survey, led by Dr. Julian Goodare, a lecturer in Scottish History at the University of Edinburgh, Doctor Louise Yeoman, a former curator at the National Library of Scotland and researcher with BBC Scotland, Dr. Joyce Miller, and Ms. Lauren Martin, took place over the course of two years. In 2000, they applied for a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which was granted, allowing the researchers to complete their compilation and data processing from February 2001 to January, 2003. Goodare and Yoeman served as co-directors, and Martin and Miller as full-time researchers. They modeled the database around a flat-field prototype designed for Martin’s Ph.D. dissertation and populated it with the data they found through their extensive archival research. In total, the dataset includes information on 3,837 cases that took place in early modern Scotland between 1563-1736.

Fortunately, the researchers had access to significant data from previous surveys of Scottish witchcraft. Specifically, they used G.F. Black’s 1938 *Calendar of Cases of Witchcraft in Scotland, 1510-1727*, Christina Larner and Hugh V. McLachlan’s *Source-Book of Scottish Witchcraft* from 1977, and Stuart McDonald’s version of the same *Source-Book*, which he revised in the 1990s. By drawing from, cross-referencing, and combining information gathered across these three sources, Goodare and his team were able to put together a more sophisticated and comprehensive dataset than had previously been available. In doing so, their aim was “to collect, collate, and record all known information about accused witches and witchcraft belief in a Microsoft Access database and to create a web-based user interface for the database.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The researchers made it possible for users to search, graph, and map data, as well as download their own copy of the database. They also designed the interface to enable public and academic researchers to more closely examine biographical and social information about accused witches. Rather than merely presenting dates and trial outcomes, the researchers wanted to present more complex and nuanced information. For example, they examined the cultural and sociological patterns of witchcraft belief and accusation, the communal, ecclesiastical, and legal procedures of investigation and trial, national and regional variations across witches and trials, and the chronology and geography of witchcraft accusation and prosecution.

Although the dataset has been the most extensive and comprehensive on the subject of Scottish witchcraft from the time period thus far, there are still significant gaps in the information the researchers were able to discover. Of the 3,837 cases recorded in the dataset, 625 of them are cases where the individual on trial is unknown. Of course, this limits users’ ability to analyze these cases in exactly the same way as we interact with others. As the content of each case, the way the trial was conducted (i.e. the framing, phrasing, and order of questions) varied at each trial, it is difficult to completely streamline data points for comparison and analysis in this dataset.

Moreover, while the dataset is accessible, presented clearly, and notes where there is missing information, users’ inability to see the original documents the researchers worked with represents a limitation. If the interface were to provide users with online access to the original documents that would be a significant step towards ensuring transparency and opening avenues for further research in this realm. This dataset showcases many of the strengths of digital humanities projects as well as some areas for growth. The time-bound nature of this dataset (1563-1736) means that the historical records of the time were quite limited but comparing Scottish witchcraft in this era to that of other countries and cultures might be one area for further exploration as well as looking at the subject beyond the early 18th century.

The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft serves as a model for other researchers who are looking to use digital humanities tools to expand the number of documents and cases they can analyze as part of a research project. This dataset equips historians with new tools for organizing and analyzing data points on this subject, and it can inspire humanist researchers beyond this subject and period to employ similar methods as part of their scholarship.

1. <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://witches.hca.ed.ac.uk/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)