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17 11



THE WITCHES OF
ISLANDMAGEE

CAMPBELL | MCCOLLUM | SNEDDON

Introduction

This graphic novel is based on an historic witch trial that occurred in early eighteenth-century County Antrim, Ireland, and is adapted from Andrew Sneddon's *Possessed by the Devil: the Real History of the Islandmagee Witches* (History Press, 2013). It is also a work of dark fiction. Dark fiction is inherently fascinated with the past and littered with supernatural metaphors that often work through the deep anxieties that accompany social upheaval.

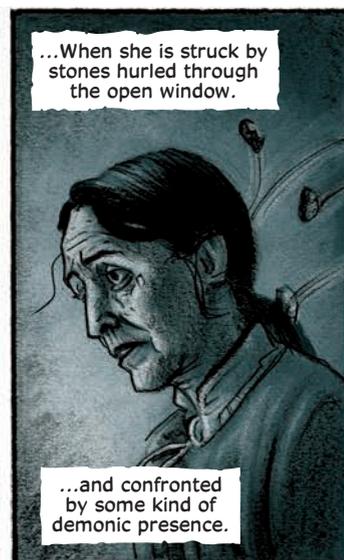
As a work of dark historical fiction, some incidents have been changed, dialogue invented, and timelines altered for storytelling purposes. It nevertheless describes real people, who lived real lives, and said and did most of the things depicted below. In some cases, the dialogue is drawn directly from original documents. The real Mary Dunbar claimed under oath to have been demonically possessed by local witches who attacked her in spirit forms that only she could see. Her account was backed-up by the great and the "good" of the local area, including the clergy, who described the demonic haunting of the Haltridge House in Islandmagee in great detail.

Fiction has been long concerned with fear, death, and the sinister side of human nature and has allowed the marginalised to tell their tales; which the nine Islandmagee Witches convicted under the 1586 Irish Witchcraft Act at Carrickfergus Assize Court in 1711 undoubtedly were. In real life, they were poor, uneducated, and some were disabled or had been badly injured or scarred during the course of hard lives. Most were considered bad neighbours and Christians and unbecoming women and men.

This has been a truly collaborative project, drawing on, and interweaving, the interests and expertise of an artist (David), a researcher and educator in Cinematic Arts and horror (Victoria), and an academic historian of witchcraft and magic (Sneddon). We hope you enjoy it as much as we have enjoyed writing it.

David Campbell, Victoria McCollum, Andrew Sneddon, 2022

Islandmagee, County Antrim





Months pass at Knowehead with little incident...

...until February 1711.



A demonic boy appears to servant Margaret Spears.

What's a servant like YOU doing, reading a book like THAT?



Devil, GET OUT of this house!

This is my mistresses' bible, you can't...



READ? The Devil taught ME! Give yourself over to him...

...or I WILL KILL ALL IN THIS HOUSE!



You will not escape me...

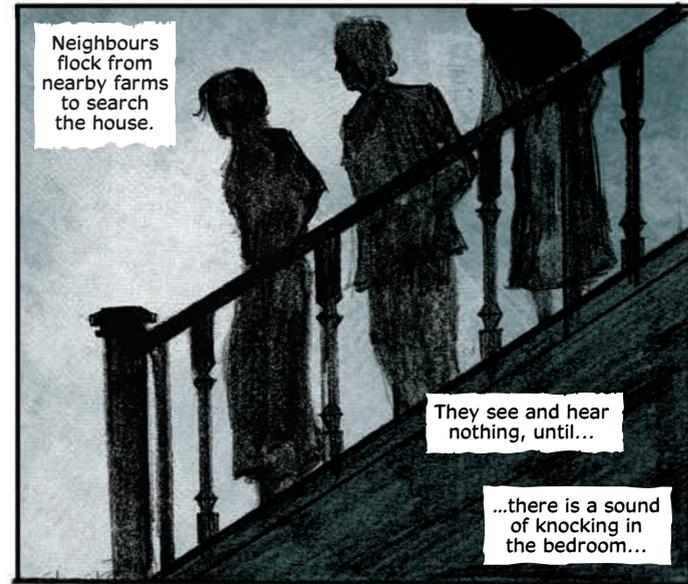
...Margaret!



I'll dig a grave and bury you! A corpse will leave this house soon...



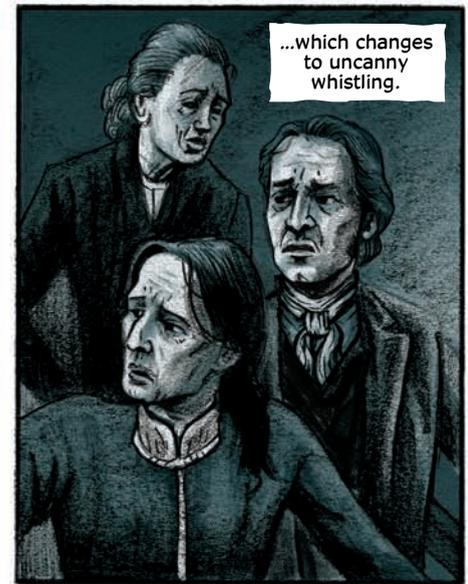
Deliver us from this evil, Lord...
...for we don't deserve it.



Neighbours flock from nearby farms to search the house.

They see and hear nothing, until...

...there is a sound of knocking in the bedroom...



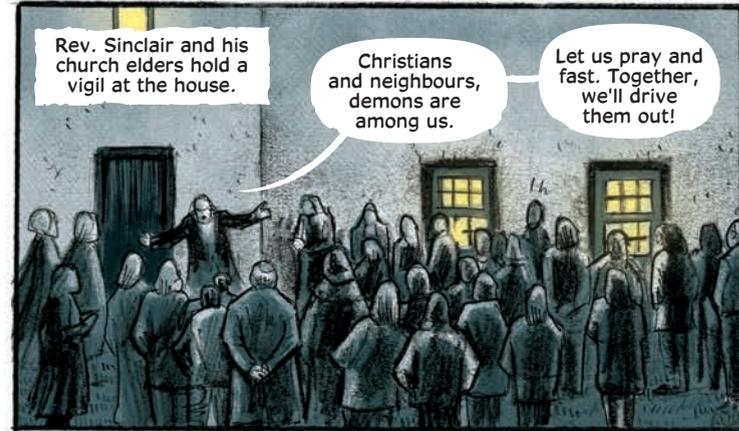
...which changes to uncanny whistling.



They find old Ann's bedsheets remade in the shape of a corpse.

The stench of sulphur is mighty.

The family seek the advice of the minister



Rev. Sinclair and his church elders hold a vigil at the house.

Christians and neighbours, demons are among us.

Let us pray and fast. Together, we'll drive them out!



But, the Devil is relentless.

Ann refuses to leave and would rather die than give place to the Devil.



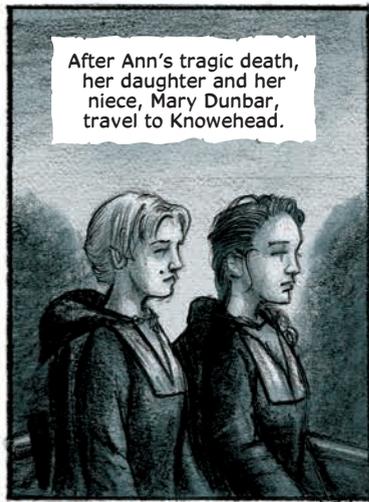
Suddenly she is stabbed in the back.



AAAAAA



On 22nd February 1711, Ann Haltridge slips out of life.



After Ann's tragic death, her daughter and her niece, Mary Dunbar, travel to Knowehead.



Mary, a respectable, educated gentlewoman approaches the silent house.

She's from Castlereagh, County Down, and a stranger to Islandmagee.



That evening, Mary becomes captivated with a curious bundle...

What's this?

Don't touch that, MARY! Look at the knots. I fear there's a charm in it.



It's an apron tied with 5 strange knots...

Ignoring the warnings, Mary unties the string.



Revealing Ann Haltridge's missing bonnet.



DON'T TOUCH THAT!



Mary convulses like a stricken animal...

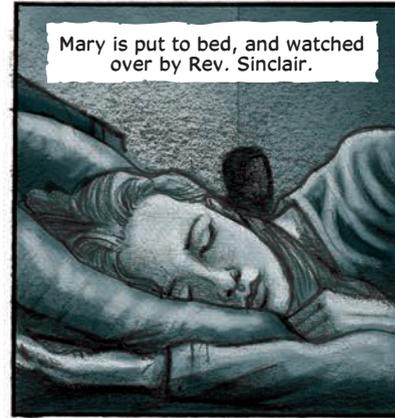
AAAAAA



MARY!

A demon! It's INSIDE her...

...collapsing to the floor.



Mary is put to bed, and watched over by Rev. Sinclair.



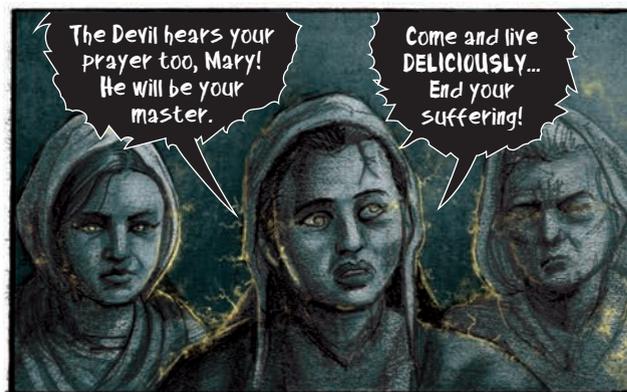
But later that night, they ARRIVE...the spectral forms of the witches haunting the Haltridge house.

How do you do, Mary Dunbar?



Fie, Fie upon you WICKED women. The Lord will preserve me.

Mary, there's not a sinner there!



The Devil hears your prayer too, Mary! He will be your master.

Come and live DELICIOUSLY... End your suffering!



By the power of Christ...

...you'll get your reward IN HELL!



Let's pierce her to her heart!

Cut off her breasts!

Tear out her tongue!



Mary faints and the power of her tongue is taken.



The 3 witches soon become 8. Mary's days and nights are plagued by demonic fits and spectral attacks.

MAAARY

MARY

All efforts to stop the witches fail and they return for WEEKS ON END.



MAAARY

Despite efforts to find a cure for Mary, by neighbours, clergymen, charmers and cunning-folk...



...the spectral witches tempt and beat her, and even transform into lowly creatures.

UGHH

The ringleader shapeshifts...



...into a monstrous spider.

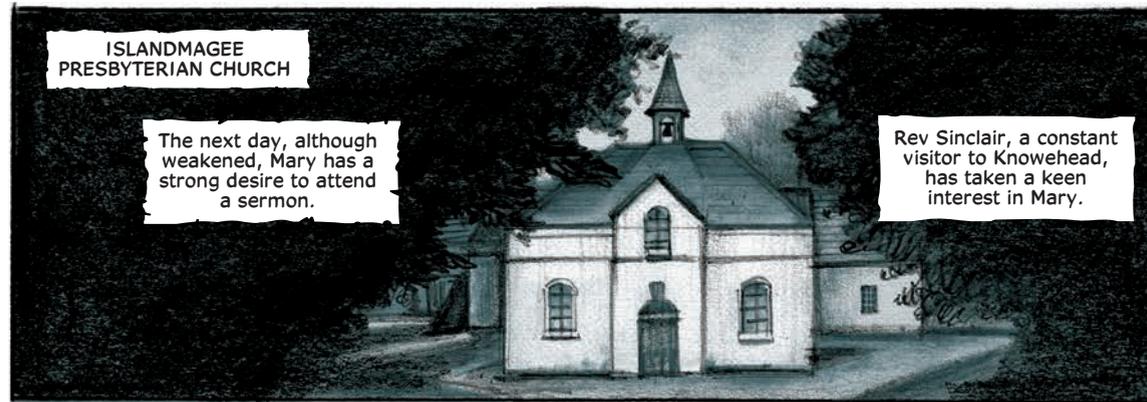


JOIN US



Mary, MARY!

Deliver this child, O Lord, from the snares of Satan!



ISLANDMAGEE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The next day, although weakened, Mary has a strong desire to attend a sermon.

Rev Sinclair, a constant visitor to Knowehead, has taken a keen interest in Mary.



Be vigilant! There are WITCHES among us! They prey on your sins and desires, and will destroy you...



God, Father in heaven, have mercy on us. Deliver us from this EVIL!



Fear and trembling comes upon the transfixed congregation...

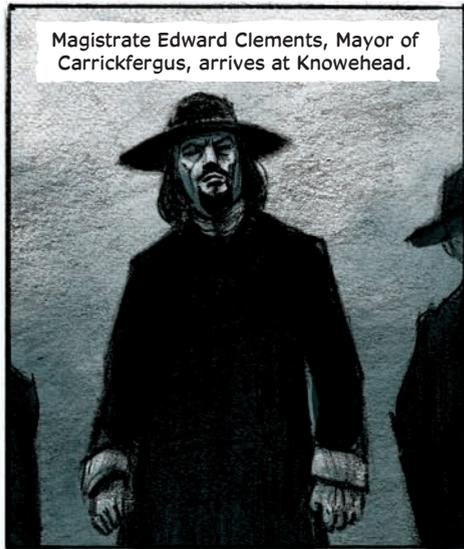


...as Mary falls into a trance.

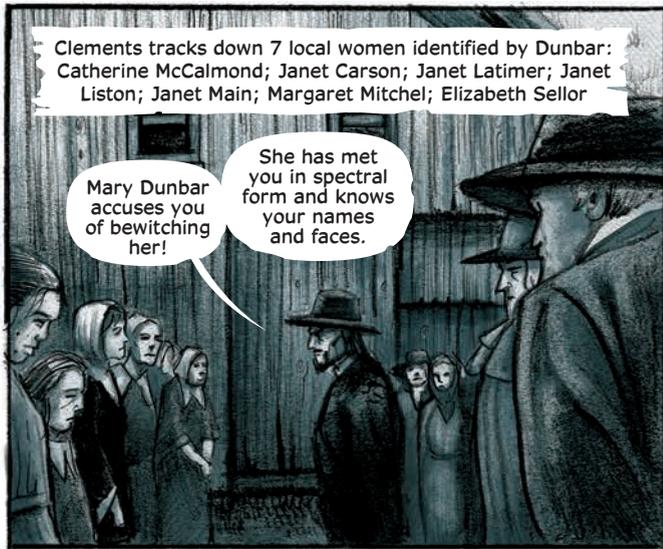
AAAA

AAAAAA

It is felt that it is time to involve the law.



Magistrate Edward Clements, Mayor of Carrickfergus, arrives at Knowehead.



Clements tracks down 7 local women identified by Dunbar: Catherine McCalmond; Janet Carson; Janet Latimer; Janet Liston; Janet Main; Margaret Mitchel; Elizabeth Sellor

Mary Dunbar accuses you of bewitching her!

She has met you in spectral form and knows your names and faces.



Mary, is this true? Are these women the cause of your terror?

Yes, they stuffed my belly with feathers and pins with crooked fingers.



BLEGH

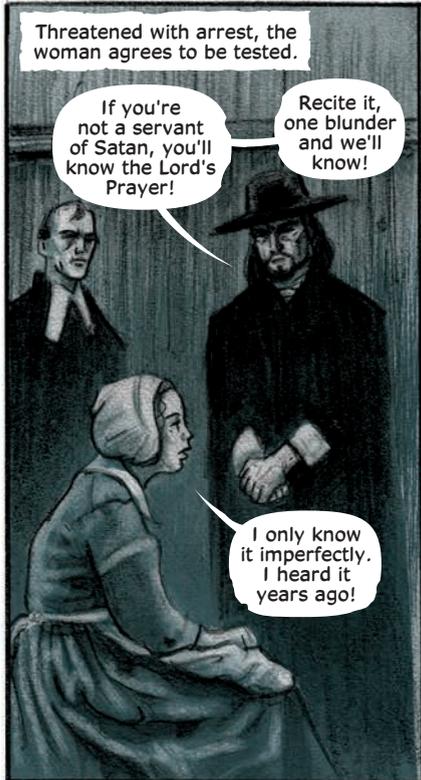


Servant Spears, can you attest to these claims?

Yes, Sir, and there is one more. She's blind of eye, covered in burns. I've seen her in the Scotch Quarter.



Constable, find me the woman who bears these marks!



Threatened with arrest, the woman agrees to be tested.

If you're not a servant of Satan, you'll know the Lord's Prayer!

Recite it, one blunder and we'll know!

I only know it imperfectly. I heard it years ago!



Are you Janet Millar? You match Dunbar's description. Come with me!

Dunbar who? I won't be coming anywhere with YOU.



Next, bring the accused near to the child and judge her reaction!

I have done no witchcraft!

As soon as Millar approaches, Dunbar falls into a fit and the test is complete.



Fearful of sending the innocent to the gallows, a series of blind tests are arranged.

30 local women are gathered together.

Including mother and daughter, Janet Liston and Elizabeth Sellor.



Men, stand the afflicted before the accused.

This will prove them innocent or guilty in the eyes of the law.



For God's sake, SET US FREE!



We're not WITCHES! The Devil's in the lass!

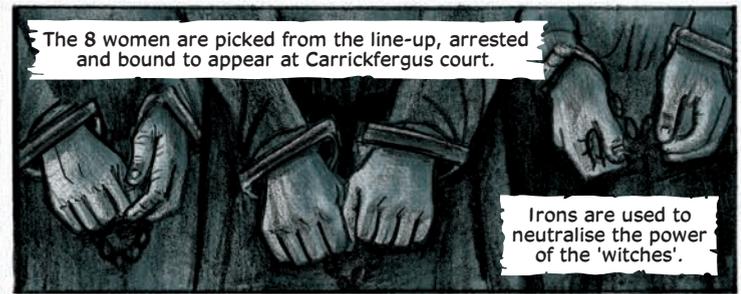


William Sellor violently protests.

LIAR! This is a drama of her own creation! That's my wife and daughter!

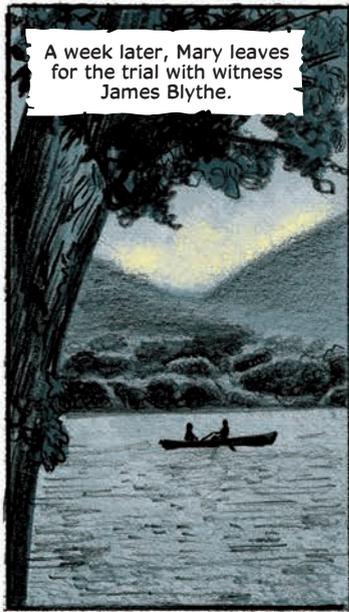


The 8 women are picked from the line-up, arrested and bound to appear at Carrickfergus court.

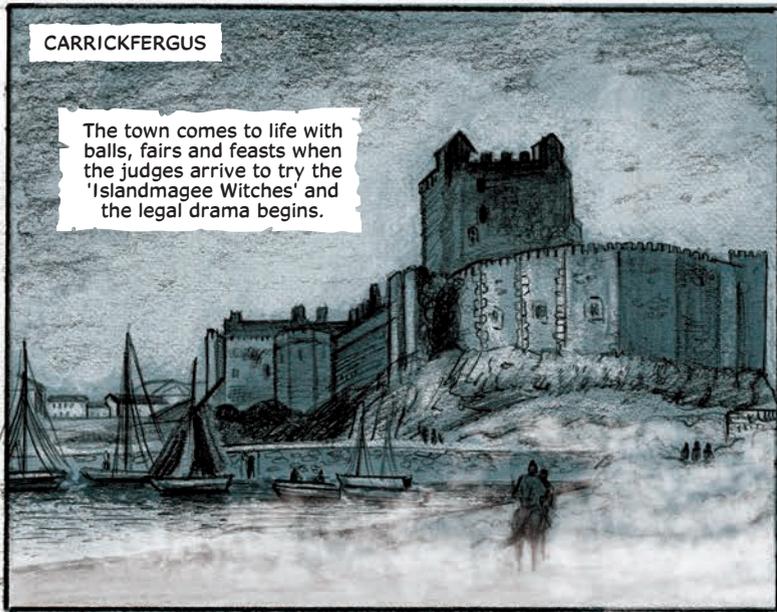


On locking eyes with the accused, Mary screams and slumps to the ground.

Irons are used to neutralise the power of the 'witches'.

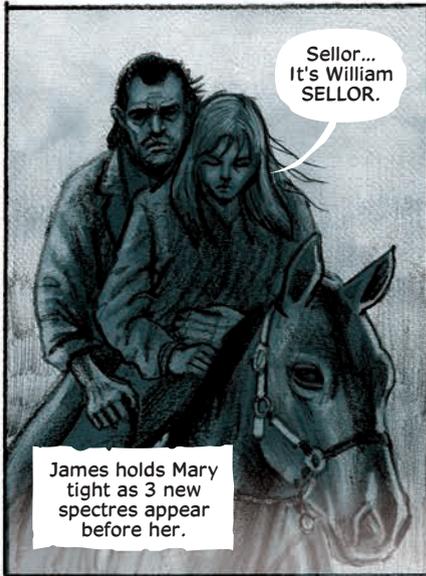


A week later, Mary leaves for the trial with witness James Blythe.



CARRICKFERGUS

The town comes to life with balls, fairs and feasts when the judges arrive to try the 'Islandmagee Witches' and the legal drama begins.



Sellor... It's William SELLOR.

James holds Mary tight as 3 new spectres appear before her.



Where do you think you're going, MARY? Prosecute our brethren, and you will pay...

...we'll **TORMENT** you worse than you've been yet!



You shall **NOT** have the power of your tongue in court!



NOOOOOOO



31st March 1711, a jury of 12 honest men and 2 senior judges, James MacCartney and Anthony Upton, try the witches.

You stand accused of conjuring evil spirits and witchcraft.

We have heard the evidence from the best of Antrim society that Mary Dunbar's claims are **TRUE**.

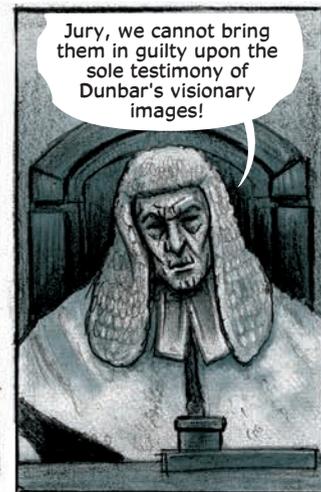
HOW DO YOU PLEAD?



NOT GUILTY! The girl's ill. She's melancholic. Or has the falling sickness!

She's a **FRAUD**, that servant of her, Spears, put her up to it!

The judges sum up the evidence for the jury to consider.



Jury, we cannot bring them in guilty upon the sole testimony of Dunbar's visionary images!



Nonsense, Upton! From the evidence, you must bring them in **GUILTY!**



Vicar of Belfast, William Tisdall, believes that Dunbar has singled the women out from their 'diabolical appearances'.

These are destitute women, twisted by deformity and disease!

Has Dunbar been reading cheap pamphlets about witches in Scotland and in Salem?

After a few minutes, the jury return the verdict...



We find the defendants GUILTY...

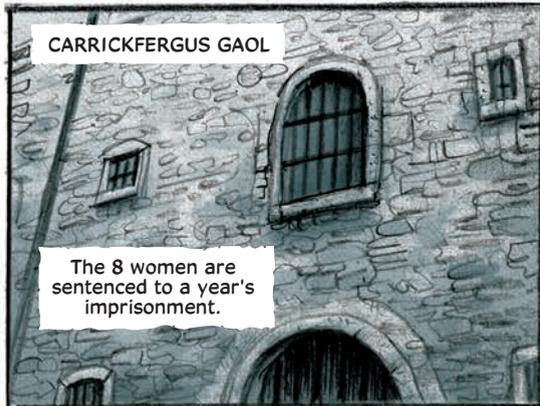
...of exorcising of witchcraft on the body of Mary Dunbar.



NOOOOO

NOOO

LIES



CARRICKFERGUS GAOL

The 8 women are sentenced to a year's imprisonment.



Conditions are harsh, cramped and filthy.

They are bound in chains.



The women are pilloried on market days, jeered at and humiliated.

Crowds pelt the women with food, rocks and noxious substances.

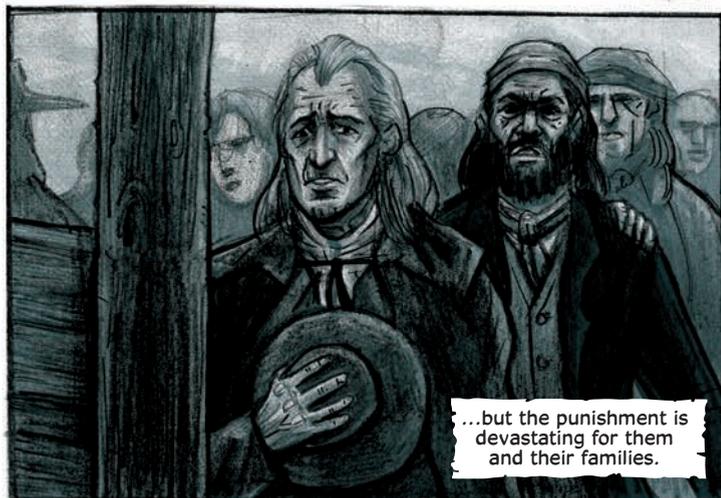


AAAGGHH

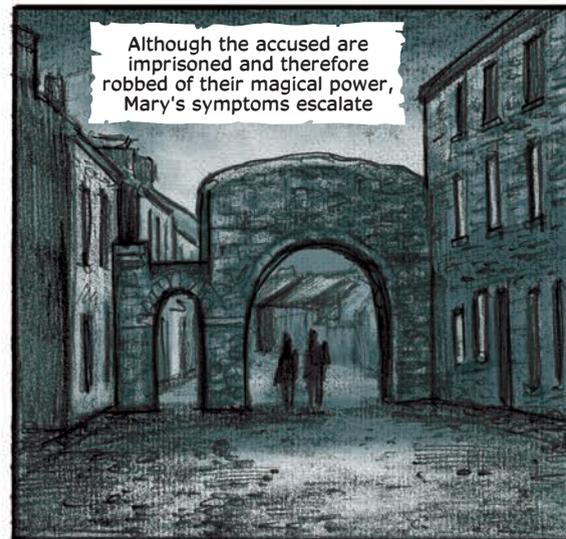
For public humiliation would dissuade future transgressions.



The women may have dodged the gallows...



...but the punishment is devastating for them and their families.



Although the accused are imprisoned and therefore robbed of their magical power, Mary's symptoms escalate



Mother, they're HERE. They torment me so.

You'll soon be home in County Down, Love, this is no place for you.

Spears sent word that Knowehead is racked by demons AGAIN.



Mary, what is it? You'll frighten the horse.

MARY!



He stabbed me! Sellor! A blade... in my back...



Once home, Mary claims to be tormented by the vengeful spectre of William Sellor.



On 21st April 1711, Mary Dunbar departs this world.



Back at Islandmagee, the hunt for the final suspect, William Sellar, is under way.

Aware that the law is closing in, he absconds but is finally found by a local constable.



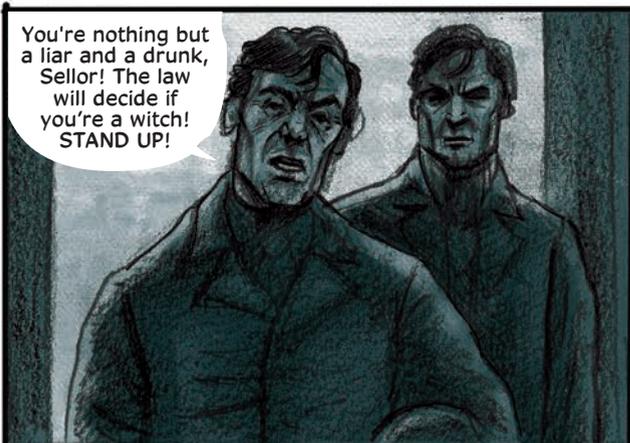
Sellar has been demonised by his community...



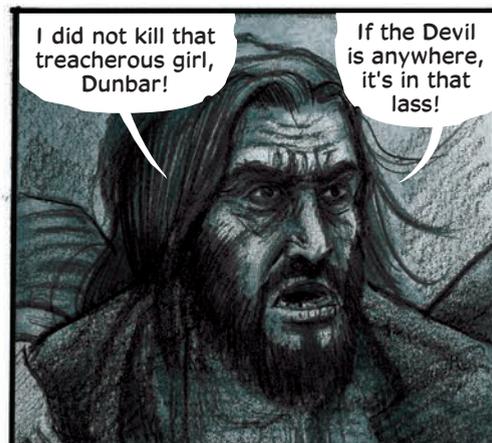
...for allowing his family to stray into Satan's clutches.

You're under arrest for the murder of Mary Dunbar by means of witchcraft.

WHAT? This is an injustice! Our family is INNOCENT!

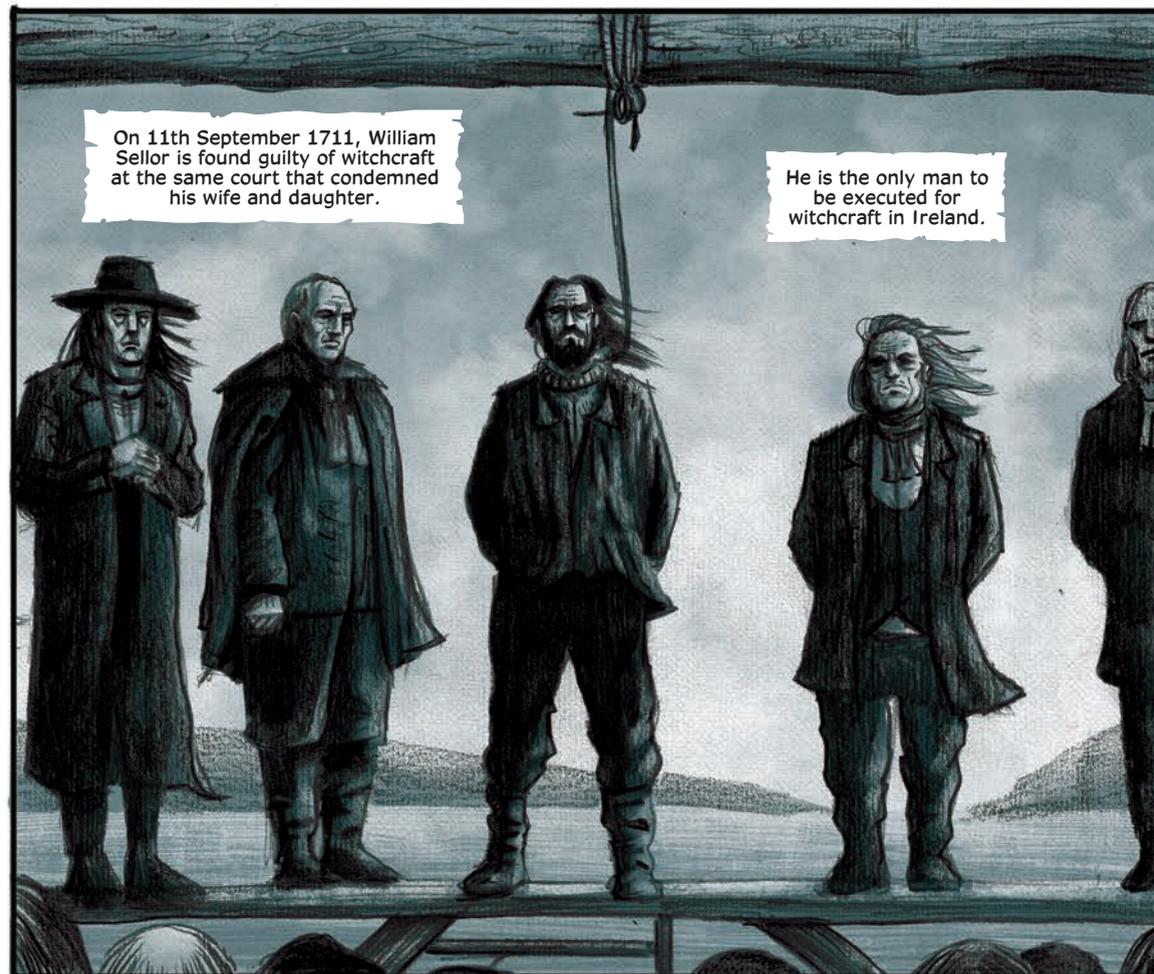


You're nothing but a liar and a drunk, Sellar! The law will decide if you're a witch! STAND UP!



I did not kill that treacherous girl, Dunbar!

If the Devil is anywhere, it's in that lass!



On 11th September 1711, William Sellar is found guilty of witchcraft at the same court that condemned his wife and daughter.

He is the only man to be executed for witchcraft in Ireland.



There are no winners in a trial of witchcraft.



The Witchcraft Act that condemned the witches was repealed in 1821, but the spectre of the trial haunted Islandmagee for centuries.



TEAM



VICTORIA MCCOLLUM

Victoria McCollum is an internationally recognised educator and researcher from Ulster University who writes books on films, TV shows and video games (especially horror), to explain why popular culture matters in helping us gain a deeper understanding of our moment in time. She has collaborated on projects with Apple, Cartoon Network, Cinemax, Facebook, HBO, New Line Cinema, RTE, Sky Atlantic, Telltale Games, Time Warner, Twitter and Universal Music Group.



ANDREW SNEDDON

Andrew Sneddon is a leading historian of witchcraft and has written numerous journal articles and four books on the subject, including a monograph on the Islandmagee witch trials, *Possessed by the Devil* (2013, 2022). He has spent the last decade taking the untold story of the Islandmagee witches and Irish witchcraft to new, diverse, international audiences. He has worked with numerous media production companies libraries, archives, museums, community, educational, and women's groups, and regularly appears on local and national TV and Radio, including BBC, ITV, TG4 and RTE. He was the President of Ireland's oldest professional historical society, Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies (2016-2022).



DAVID CAMPBELL

David Campbell is an artist and graphic designer who has worked extensively in promoting and supporting the comic book artform and culture in Ireland. He founded 2D, the NI Comics Festival (2007-2013), which was Ireland's longest running annual comic event. He then founded ComicCity in 2015, a festival celebrating comics & creative arts, which ran until 2018. He previously worked extensively with schools and colleges teaching about art and illustration. He was Art Director for the Celtronic music festival, from 2001 to 2015. He currently works as a designer for Games Workshop, home of Warhammer and Lord of the Rings.

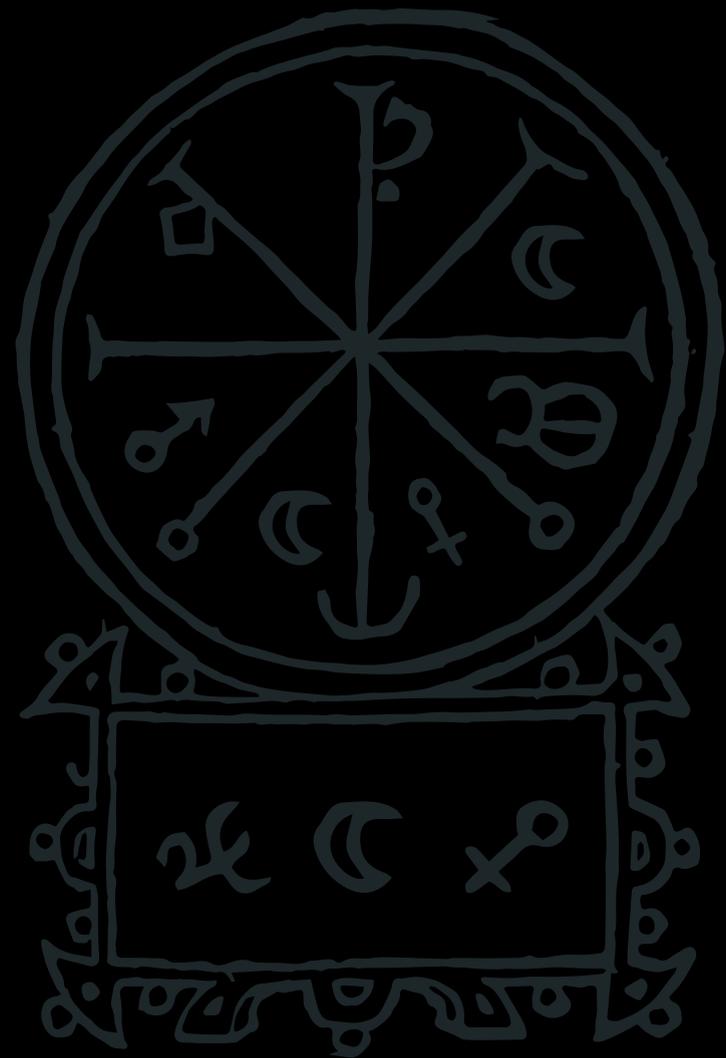


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS + THANKS

Victoria: To my dear Mum and Dad, you'll be very glad to know that my Reformed Presbyterian upbringing was of great use to me during this project. To my beloved Gem, thank you for reminding me, time and again, that fitting in is overrated.

Andrew: Thanks to Leanne, James and Andrew and the Reids.

David: Big thanks to the clan, Claire, Faolán, Caoilte and Connla. To my Mum and best critic Susie, who always encouraged me to draw, no matter how strange the subject. For my little brother Peter.

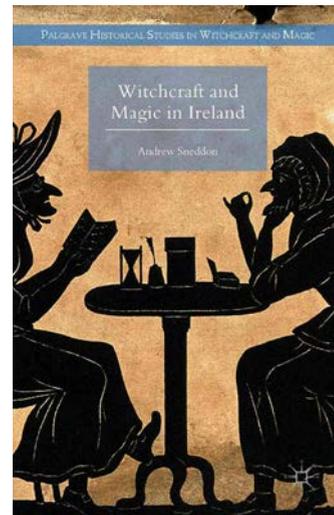
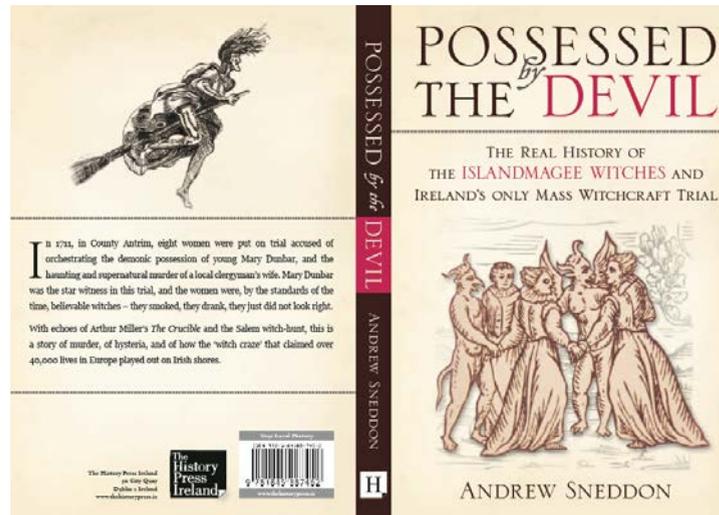




WITCH HUNT



INVESTIGATING THE HAUNTING OF HALTRIDGE HOUSE



Andrew: I had been working on and off on the history of witchcraft for over a decade by the time I turned to Irish witchcraft in 2009, largely because my students wanted to study it and there wasn't much academic writing on it. I was contracted to write *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Palgrave, 2015) but when, in early 2011, the 300th year anniversary of the trial of the Islandmagee Witches seemed to be passing by un-noticed I put the book aside and wrote a press release for the University. The response by the public and media was overwhelming and I knew then I had to write (mostly in the evenings) a book on the case, *Possessed by the Devil* (History press, 2013), despite heavy teaching loads, a new baby, and other commitments.

I also knew it had to be accessible, narrative driven but scholarly at the same time. What made it easier was the fact it was so well documented with surviving letters, newspapers, pamphlets and court legal manuscripts (you can see these for free on w1711.org). Again, the public response was fantastic, and the book had a wider reach than anything I had written previously. I spent the next 6 years doing on TV, radio, podcasts, public events and talks about the 1711 trial and Irish witchcraft and magic in general. Writers, storytellers, filmmakers and playwrights also began to fashion their own histories of the Islandmagee witches. Ireland's last witch trial was becoming the cultural phenomenon it is today.

In 2018, I was invited to a meeting with a local council to discuss possible tourist strategies surrounding the

trial and I knew that if this was to happen it could not be done by a lone historian. I then asked Victoria and Dr Helen Jackson (Interactive Media, UU) if they would like to bring their experience with dark tourism and using digital technologies in heritage to bear on the Islandmagee witch trials. And the second, creative, digital part of my engagement with Islandmagee Witches 1711 was born. This aims to bring the story to life using creative practice and emerging digital technologies, namely: a musical score, an bespoke animation, a website, digitised documents, a VR app, and a video game. But over to you, Victoria, to say a bit about the genesis of the graphic novel and how you came to be interested in Irish witchcraft!

Victoria: I was in the 2nd year of my PhD (on rural horror films) when *Possessed by the Devil* was published. Despite living on the Causeway Coast for +20 years, I'd never heard of the Islandmagee Witches. The only history classes I had ever attended was at a non-selective Protestant school, where the curriculum lent away from the darker aspects of Irish history, avoiding controversy at every turn. Not a word on institutionalised discrimination, civil rights or women's history for that matter, certainly not the existence of witches and witchcraft in early modern Ireland. But, I could tell you about how many ships were built to help the war effort!

That said, I was raised Reformed Presbyterian on a dairy farm, so I knew a thing or two about God, Satan, piety and patriarchy, not to mention 'butter witches' (legend had it that if a hare entered the parlour, the

cows would stop milking). So, I found your book surprising and at the same time strangely familiar. What struck me most about it was your descriptions of the real-life supernatural horror. It's absolutely frightening. I jumped at the chance to work with you on a project that would explore how dark and difficult heritage could be creatively and ethically retold.

There was something about the graphic novel. People have this misconception that the combination of words and pictures is simplistic, childish in some way. The reality is that in the graphic novel words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could put across alone. Although, I needed to get an artist onboard who could put this in practice. I had known of David's work for quite some time. He had been developing comic book learning materials for young audiences under the Nerve Centre's Creative Centenaries project. I found his artwork so sophisticated and expressive, so I pitched him the project and he jumped onboard with a little trepidation, "what do you mean she saw a demon-boy?"

Andrew: Victoria, when you mentioned a graphic novel based on the book and the chance to write it with you, it didn't take me long to say yes. I love the genre and working on scripts for the media on Irish witchcraft is collaborative and engaging but you are largely facilitating someone else's creative vision. This was a chance to engage in truly creative, collaborative public history. I had a word with myself first. I couldn't write it like a historian, this was not a history book, it was historically informed creative practice based on original documents and *Possessed by the Devil*. And most of all we had to convert both into a 15-page script.

Victoria: Agreed! If we think of the key to crafting a good script, one of the most critical elements is to break the story down into beats. Story beats are short, memorable events that move the story forward. *Possessed by the Devil* already moved chronologically, the contents were already story beats (1. A Well-Respected Woman; 2. Arrival; 3. To Catch a Witch; 4. Witchcraft; 5. The Wheels of Justice, and so on), so it was relatively straight-forward to decide on the structure: the intro; inciting incident; raising the stakes,

and so on. I do distinctly remember us having a conversation about potential themes early on, Andrew, the central ideas that the novel would convey.

This was soon after re-reading your book for the second time. You are very exact, sincere and impartial in your interpretation of the story, leaving the reader to reach their own conclusions. For me, it seemed that the 'witches' at Islandmagee were the vulnerable targets of a 'good', God-fearing, patriarchal society, one increasingly guided by suspicion, distrust and cruel ideologies. So, your book about what happened in 1711 felt incredibly timely to me in 2021. At the time, the #MeToo movement had gained momentum; women were still protesting across the globe (against Trump); whilst political polarisation, isolation and fear (caused by the pandemic) was triggering widespread interest in the supernatural, mystical, and magical.

Andrew: Sometimes when writing (even as an academic) you need to turn off your rational mind and allow yourself just to write what you feel comes naturally. I had read graphic novels, but I had no experience of writing one. And that is where David came in. He was brilliant from the start. He took the time to read the book and gave us constant steers and pointers on how to get all our ideas condensed into a readable novel. It was clear that he was not just illustrating our words but helping us to write the novel itself.

It was important for me that it worked as a graphic novel but also that readers came away from it with an understanding of what happened (or at least what people said had happened) in Co. Antrim in 1711. Therefore, no characters, names, dates, locations, or major events were invented. The "crimes" the women and man were accused of in the novel and subsequently found guilty of, and what happened to them afterwards, is based on historical research. We even used written testimonies (given under oath) to guide our dialogue and depictions of people and events.

I also wanted to draw on key themes about the trial I had pondered in my academic writing: the convicted





women's agency and resistance; their poverty, marginal status, and disabilities; the wider political and religious turmoil at that time that created a sense of fear and panic; and the fact that people then lived in magical, moral universe where the power of the devil, magic and witchcraft was a reality and all around them.

Victoria: You know what really bugs me about this project? Everyone knows that the graphic novel is a (lightly) dramatised and (partially) fictionalised interpretation of the real history of the Islandmagee Witches, so they're likely to assume that the most absurd, horrifying stuff is us taking 'dramatic license', when quite the opposite is true. The spider witch, that was real (or at least what witnesses said was real)! John Getty believed he witnessed Margaret Mitchell in spider form. Can you imagine? Not to mention that hateful little demon boy, sent from hell. No embellishment was needed when it came to the most dramatic elements of the story: a rare gift in the land of storytelling. The original testimonies were absolutely chilling.

I wish we could've included more of the supernatural disturbances that happened at Haltridge house, like the free-roaming, violent cloaks stuffed with straw, or the pillows that walked across the floor, or the phantom horses! There was such depth and breadth to the range of supernatural phenomena that could occur back then.

Andrew: But we had to tell the story in 15 pages and balance readability with historical accuracy.

The dialogue is based on historical sources, but it is nevertheless a dramatic re-creation of what was said at the time, and timelines and events have been condensed and conflated in some instances. For example, the supernatural attack on Ann Haltridge lasted nearly three months but is described in two pages in the graphic novel. The attacks on Mary Dunbar and the subsequent "testing" and arrest of the women she identified during their spectral attacks occur all at once in the novel but took place over the course of a whole month, March 1711. Furthermore, Dunbar did not travel straight to Carrickfergus Assize court from Islandmagee but from Larne where she had been relocated to give the Haltridge family some respite. It was in Larne that Dunbar was witnessed levitating above a bed and not in the Presbyterian Church in Islandmagee, although she did demand to hear a sermon there and did convulse upon hearing it. And it was Janet Main's husband, Andrew Ferguson, who intervened when his wife was accused of witchcraft and not William Sellor. Dunbar did indeed meet William on the way to court and only regained her speech a few hours after the trial had ended. We know that Dunbar died shortly after the first trial and that William was found guilty of bewitching her, so it is highly probable that he was hung for the capital crime of murder using witchcraft under the 1586 Irish Witchcraft Act.

Victoria: For me, Mary Dunbar is such an interesting and complex character. She's a good reminder that complicit women so often add nuance and complexity to society's horrors. It angers me that Dunbar's

testimony was taken more seriously than the women she accused by the local community and more importantly by the trial jury. That said, Dunbar was also trapped in a community in which she would have been treated as peripheral and unimportant, in a culture of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. Imagine that. I can see the appeal of becoming a demoniac. All of a sudden, you're the centre of attention, perceived as having extraordinary strength. Your body writhing uncontrollably is regarded a natural and normal symptom (of possession) and now you're allowed (read: expected) to contort, spit, convulse and curse. Imagine the new agency you'd have. Although, possessed female bodies are rebellious bodies too and so the pillars of masculinity must restore order. Adolescent females, like Dunbar, are usually the site of evil's apparent self-destruction in horror films, like *The Exorcist*. Society's fear of the unruly woman has no mercy.

Andrew: When writing *Possessed by the Devil*, one thing became apparent, this was not just a witchcraft case, it was the type you found increasing in the late seventeenth, early eighteenth-century British Calvinist network (Salem, 1692-3, Scotland 1696-1704, and Co. Antrim, 1698): in that it involved demonic possession. And Mary Dunbar was just the sort of demoniac, or demonically possessed person that you found in these cases, some of whom were exposed as frauds for simulating their symptoms by playing out in front of an audience the cultural script of possession; a script that could be learnt from reading witchcraft pamphlets or by word of mouth and could be adapted as you went along to the needs of the onlookers or "audience". It wasn't for nothing that Shakespeare in his plays commented on the theatricality of demonic possession. Dunbar fit the bill of the demoniac in other ways, she was a young adult, visiting a religiously restrictive household, and still officially a girl because she was unmarried. Possession allowed her to move from the margins of adult life to the centre of attention, to behave in ways otherwise socially unacceptable and to endanger the lives of adults she should normally obey. This suggests that all her symptoms

were simulated, but it is likely that some were not, that they stemmed from physical or mental illness, or started as simulated behaviour but later became real: her convulsions for example. And we shouldn't forget Dunbar like most people around her would have believed in witchcraft and the earthly power of the devil.

Victoria: To be honest, I was bit anxious about depicting much of the graphic novel through Mary Dunbar's point of view. If Dunbar did learn the part of a demoniac from accounts about Salem or Scotland, and if she did make the whole thing up, then she a cruel antagonist in the story. However, the novel is set in 18th century Ireland, to not give any credence to Dunbar's claims would lead to distorted understanding. Back then, as it is in the novel, the stakes were real, the Devil was real, belief in the witch's powers had been tenaciously but quietly maintained over the preceding centuries. Even if Mary was faking, she probably did, at some point, believe that she was being attacked by demonic forces. When *The Exorcist* was released, the film caused a spike in people fearing they too were possessed. It shouldn't be underestimated how deeply affecting such performances can be even in a rational, enlightened, civil society.

We wanted to plunge the reader into the reality of the 1700s in County Antrim, a site of political and religious turmoil where the supernatural, paranormal, mystical, and occult held a strange and potent sway, and where the conviction of witches was 'just' and legal. So we decided to lead with Dunbar's POV within the story world of the graphic novel, but we were also determined to grant the victims' much agency. One 'shot' comes to mind, the panel of the witches' faces anguished and angry. The reader is obligated to look at the now-imprisoned women straight in the eye. Their penetrative fixed gaze issues a direct and powerful demand. I remember us talking about how victim anger is so vastly under-represented in popular culture, especially when it comes to women. We also talked a lot about railing against the typical hyper-sexualised depictions of the witch.





Andrew: Absolutely, the hardest thing to get across when teaching the history of the witch trials is that witchcraft belief was not merely a cynical tool that people used to get rid of the troublesome or the unwanted. In some cases, this was certainly true, but most accusations arose from people who had a genuine belief they had been bewitched. Witches were real and they could rip from you, in ways you had no control over, all that was dear: your livelihood, your life, your family, your property. Add into this deadly mix, wider political and societal issues deeply affecting your community and intensifying gender and interpersonal tensions, and you have all the makings of a witch-hunt. And a decade ago, while researching the book, it was apparent that Islandmagee in 1711 had these things by the bucket-load.

What you see in the novel is what Dunbar says she saw and what she told, under oath, to the Justice of the Peace and parish constables and clergymen. More importantly, they believed her. The great and the good of North-East Antrim society made written statements backing up what she claimed and catalogued in detail the supernatural occurrences in Knowehead House. More importantly, they stood up in open court in front of their community and validated them once more. So, it is also their point of view, at certain times, that is being shown.

But what was also important for me to show in the book, and it is there in the novel as well, is that if Dunbar was a believable witness, the accused were believable witches. They fit the common stereotype of those who fell into the clutches of the Devil, bad neighbours, bad members of society, and bad women. Their disabilities and scars betrayed an inner corruption and sinfulness, and their drinking, smoking, and resistance to the legal process challenged gender norms. Defying these norms, whether male or female, didn't necessarily ensure you were prosecuted for and/

or convicted of witchcraft but it certainly upped your chances. All in all, 50,000 people were put to death for witchcraft in early modern Europe, between the mid 15th and later 18th century, but that doesn't include those who were castigated by their communities, tortured but lived, or were banished, mutilated, whipped, or branded.

Victoria: Why is it, Andrew, that in imagery, literature and drama, the witch is so gendered? She either castrates and destroys via her ugliness, or emasculates and corrupts via her beauty. Either way, they've been painted (both literally and metaphorically) as corrupters of masculine health, sanity and good order. I think that our inclusion of William Sellor throughout the novel is really important. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I didn't know that men were accused of witchcraft. 'Male' and 'victim' remains such a societal oxymoron, so it took me a while to get my head around the fact that men too were violently weeded out of society by their peers, neighbours and family members for threatening accepted gender norms. I guess the truth is that patriarchy and its surrogates (sexism, misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and so on) hurts us all, and played a role in witchcraft accusation. When I mention the male witch in class, my students instantly think of powerful warlocks. Our depiction of a male witch (William Sellor) thus reflects historical reality.

Andrew. The word "witch" in early modern culture was a gender-neutral term but the visual imagery and demonological (witchcraft) writings tended to highlight the negative traits of women as they perceived them (sexually voracious, impious, sinful, easily tempted, feeble-minded, irrational) by linking the women who displayed them to witchcraft. Womens' weak natures made them more likely to be tempted by Satan and to renounce God and wage war on Christendom. There are relatively few depictions of male witches in the visual imagery of this period despite the fact that

10,000 men were executed for witchcraft. Not all men in the past (or today) benefitted from the spoils of patriarchy and men who didn't meet contemporary ideals of masculinity were more likely to be accused of witchcraft than those who did. This certainly is the case with William. In the eyes of the community, his unmanliness is shown in his inability to abide by and uphold the law (resisting arrest), to be a good head of household, father and husband (he let them fall into the clutches of the devil), and to demonstrate self-control and live a Christian life (he had a fondness for the drink and was unkempt).

Victoria: It's that sense of historical carefulness, in the novel, that I'm really proud of. When you consider that David sketched every character with an eye on their historical description. Look at the establishing shots (of the locations), every single one is a rendering of reality, they're also key to the change of pace throughout the story. David's artistry never ceased to amaze me. He is an encyclopaedia of expertise when it comes to the graphic novel: from developing the concept, to adapting story to art, from the panels to the gutters, from speech balloons to the motion lines, from visual effects to colour, David painstakingly pencilled, inked and designed every panel and page in conversation with us. He nailed it with his crisp, highly stylised line-work and dark, disturbing imagery. Looking back, it took the three of us over a year to bring this novel to life. Honestly, writing my monograph was easier! Never have I crafted any piece of research with such painstaking care. I guess that's the life of a historian, Andrew, eh?

Andrew: Probably yes! But I learned so much about the graft and talent that goes into creative work: the dedication and commitment needed to make a graphic novel read and look well. There is no denying the regular meetings, the thought and the hard work that went into this. It was a far bigger commitment than I thought it was going to be. When I saw how good it was (in my opinion) that kept me going. This was needed because what kept me awake at night was the constant panic about walking the fearsome tightrope of writing a good graphic novel that did not do a disservice to the past.

Victoria: Yes, I also had nightmares about us rendering a historical comic book with great slabs of text. I always tell my students that images are a way of writing, but the graphic novel is even more challenging than film: it's such an open, flexible space, where readers can move forward, backwards, upwards, downwards. This can be creatively overwhelming. I think we began to realise that it was actually an ideal format for presenting history as unstable, multi-vocal, and mediated by historians. The horror helped too, of course, because most of us understand the 'tools of the trade', so shots and composition can be read at

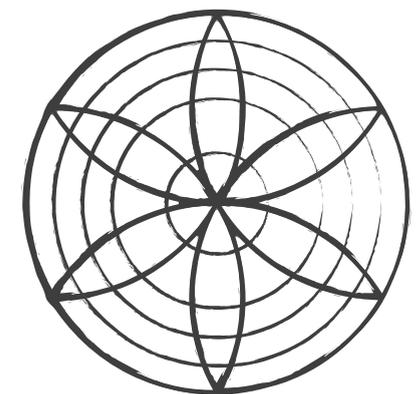
a glance. I.e., we know a spectre when we see one! David knew the craft so intimately. The collaborative nature of this project will linger with me for a lifetime.

Also, wouldn't you agree that the horror genre really shines here? This is partly to do with the fact that the genre has been concerned with forces that threaten individuals and groups for over a century. The genre has always been concerned with the workings of power and repression, so, in a way, horror is especially useful for examining the forces that threaten people in society, especially women. I wholeheartedly believe that this is demonstrated in the graphic novel.

Andrew: I agree, working in a new genre is disorientating yet freeing as well. Possessed by the Devil deviated from my other monographs in that narrative was key, but it was a linear narrative nevertheless. In my head, when writing Possessed, I saw it as a good documentary, light on exposition, explaining only what had to be explained while ensuring the storytelling was crisp and well-paced. As you've pointed out, Victoria, the graphic novel is not necessarily a linear narrative form, so it presented a new way of storytelling for me as well. Does it relate the mediated nature of historical narratives, hopefully, as it is always important to remember that history is what historians write about the past as the past itself is gone.

The filmic quality of graphic novel shines through. Victoria, cinematic arts is your bread and butter - understanding and teaching it, but both David and I are consummate fans of movies too. So, when we were storyboarding and getting ideas for shots and sequences, I think we all went straight to films, especially spooky films.

Andrew and Victoria: we hope you enjoy the graphic novel as much as well enjoyed writing it. And that it is in a quiet way a reminder of the power of ideas on society and of the lives ended and destroyed by witchcraft trials.





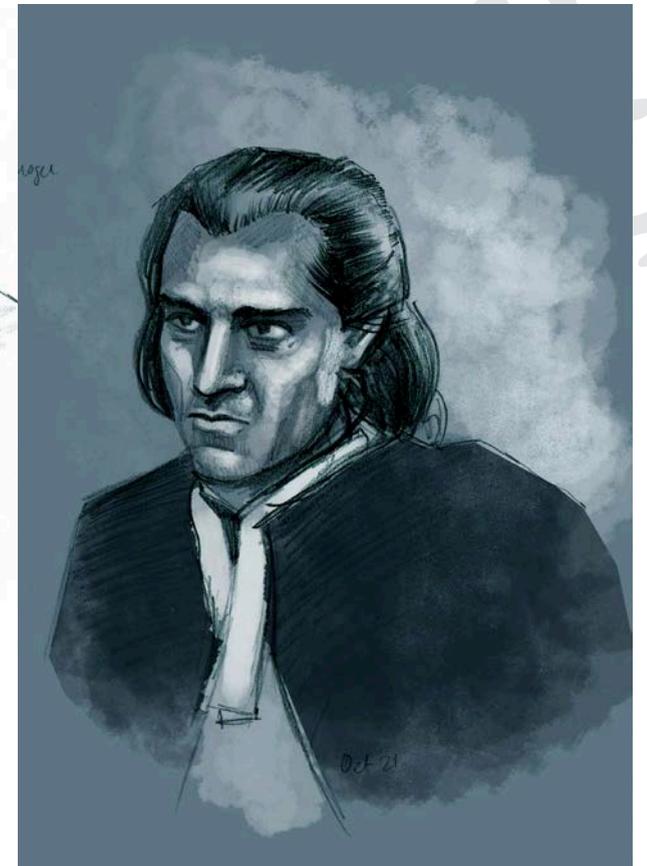
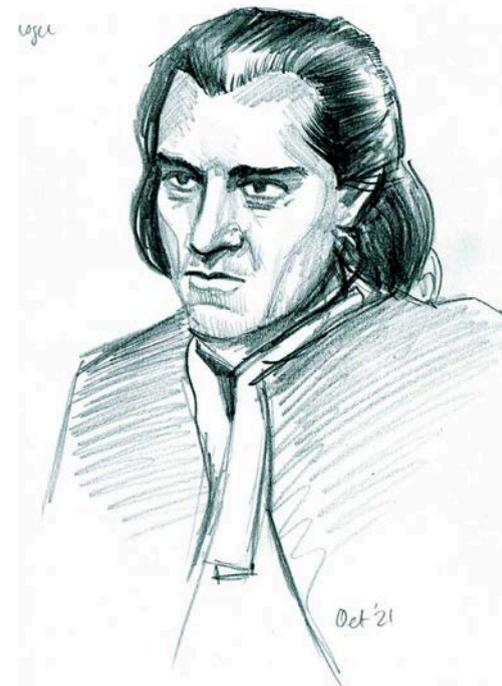
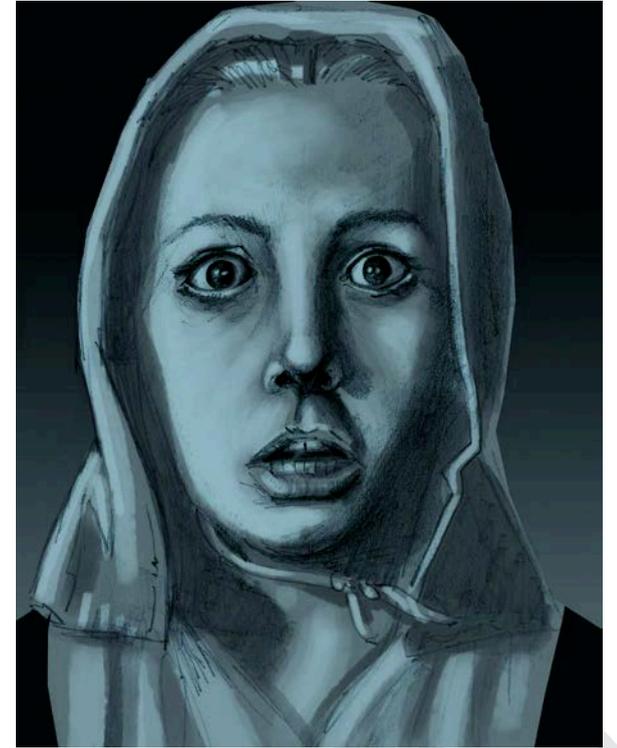
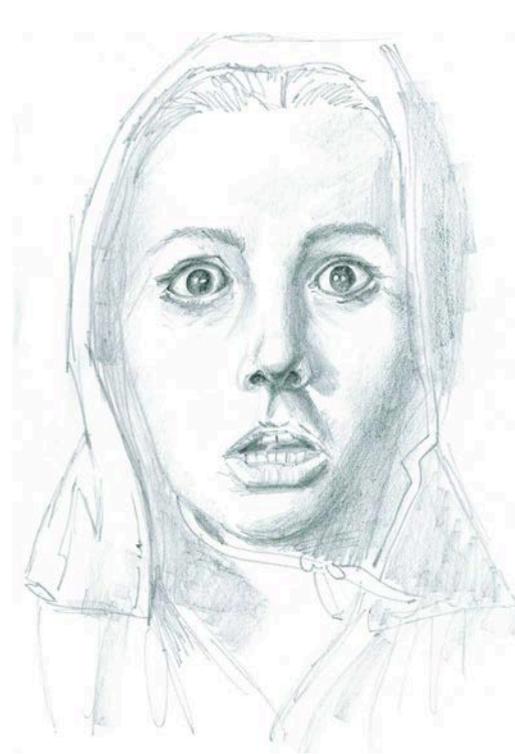
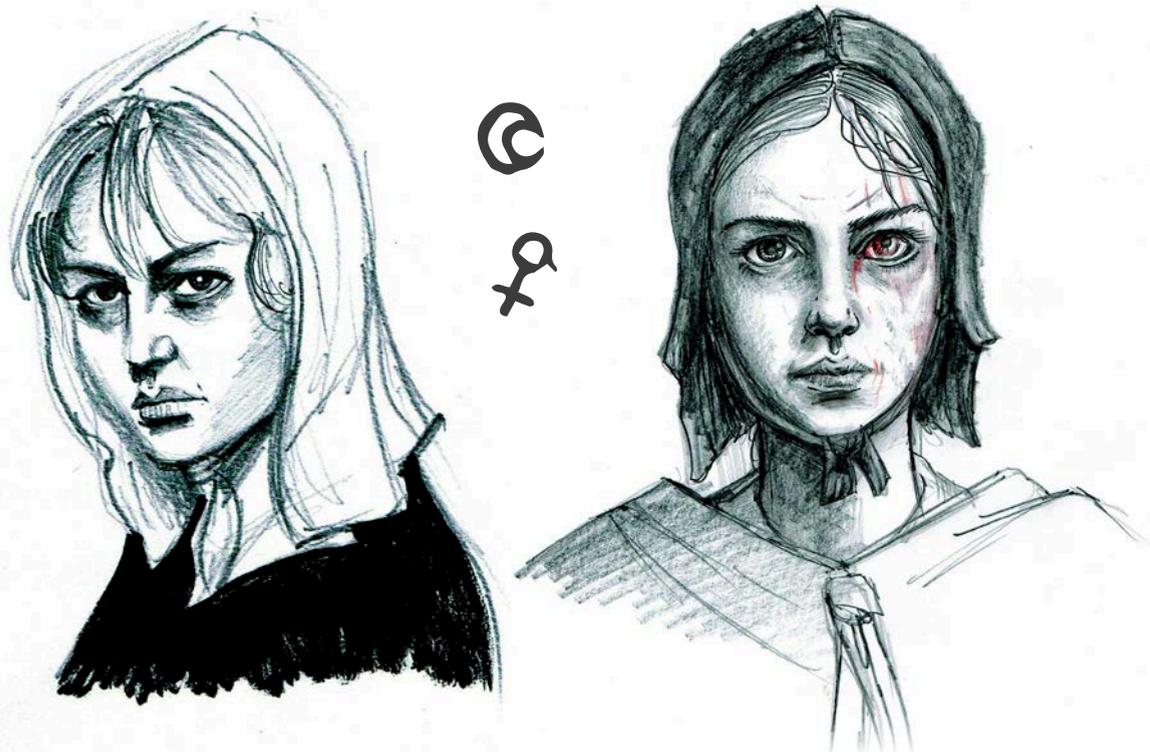
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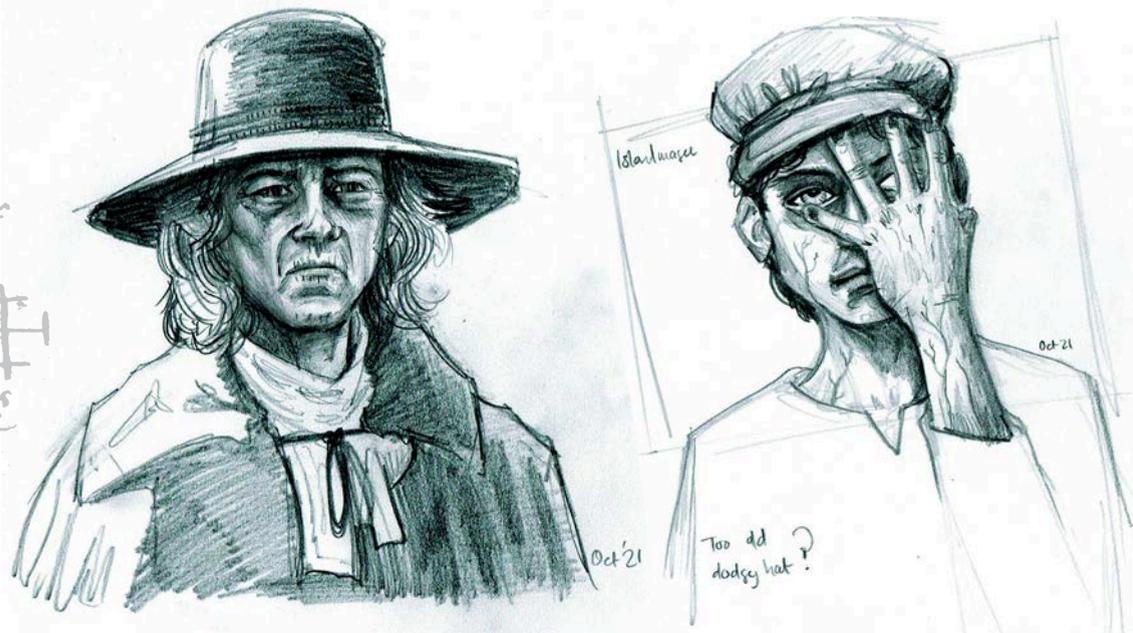
Mary Dunbar is the main character in the comic, so we tried a few different versions of her, with variations in art style, before we settled on a final look. These early experiments helped us establish the overall look of the book.



I tried some rough pencil and pen and ink techniques. I wanted to try and reflect the visceral and horrific aspects of the story through the art style, with rough, imperfect lines. I liked the idea of a riff on traditional pencils, to suit the period setting, but taking it in a looser, (hopefully) more expressive direction.



When we considered the colour and tone of the book, we discussed full colour, but then chatted about using a limited palette to evoke a sense of history and help with the period setting. We tried grey tones and this then developed into the blue scheme used in the final work.



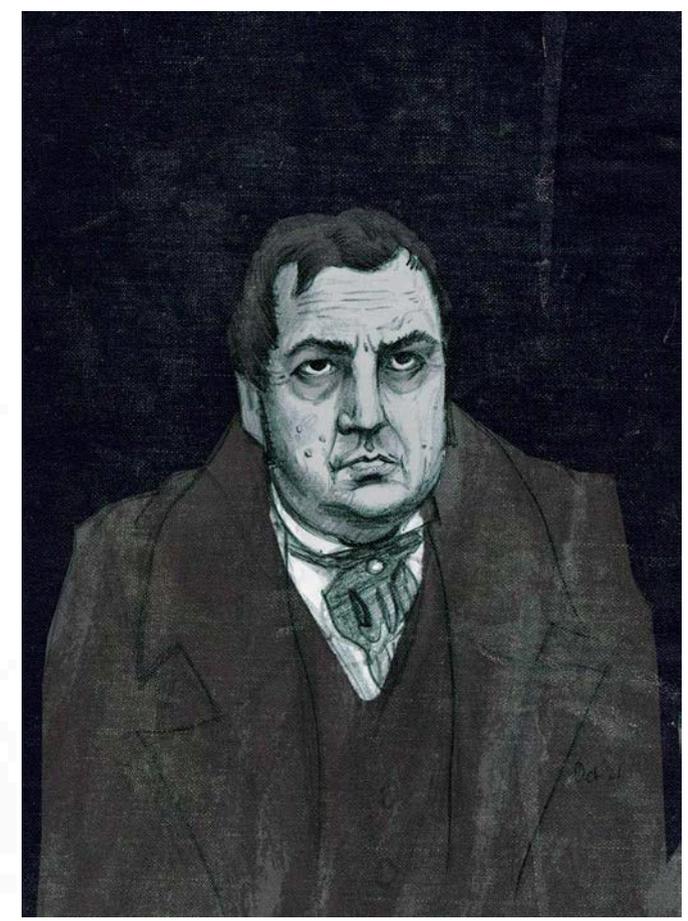
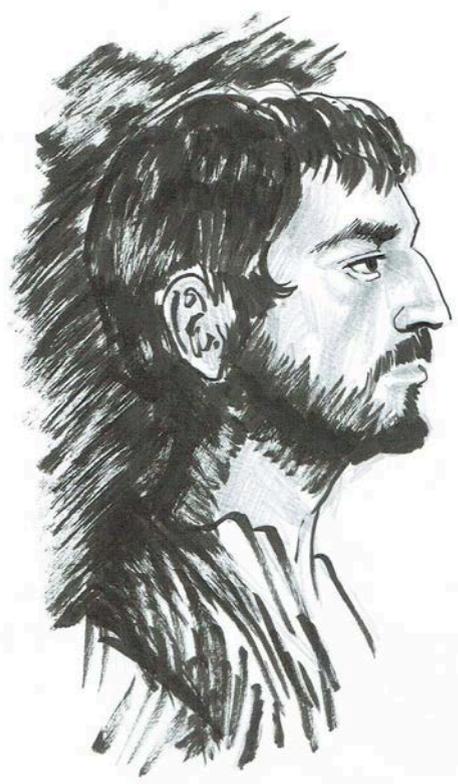
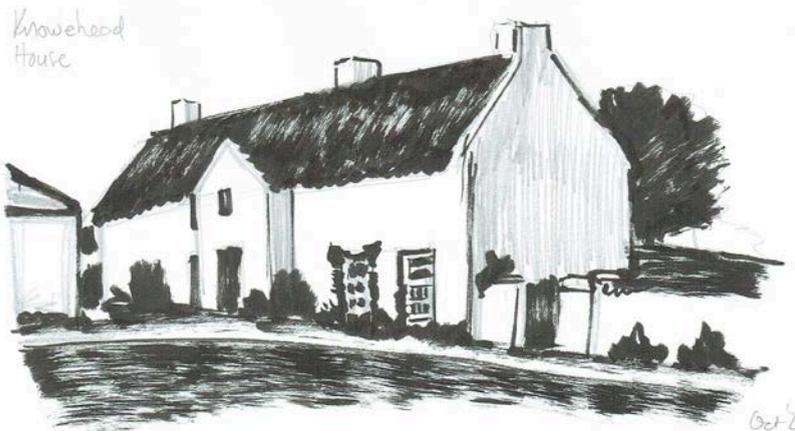
mentor
life

Oct '21
Too dd
dodgy hat?

Although it can ultimately leave you questioning your own limited skills, I always enjoy checking out other artists' work to help inspire and inform your own attempts. For this I went back to the seminal work of illustrators Austin Briggs and Noel Sickles. It was also a great chance to further admire some of the darker comic/illustration art by masters like Mike Mignola, Jeffrey Alan Love, Joao Ruas and Alex Toth.



The demon boy was an early standout in the story, as he's so distinctive in terms of his bizarre behaviour, so it was a challenge in terms of the best way to illustrate him. We could only show a few of his many twisted actions in the comic.

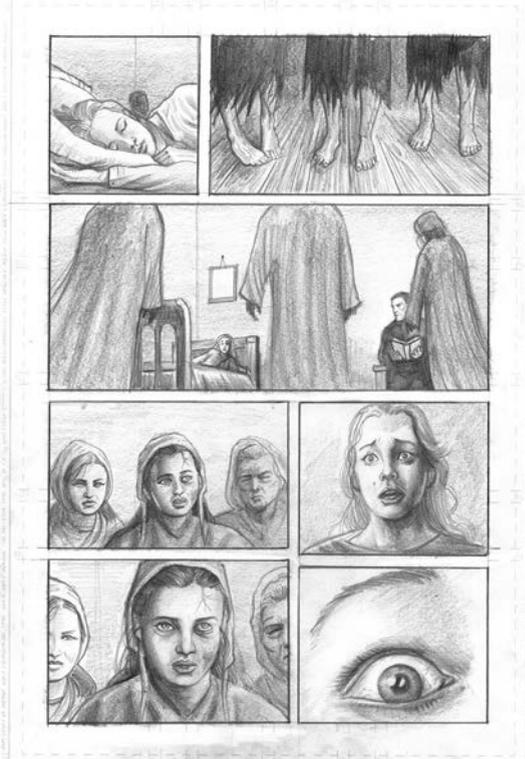


MAKING A COMIC PAGE

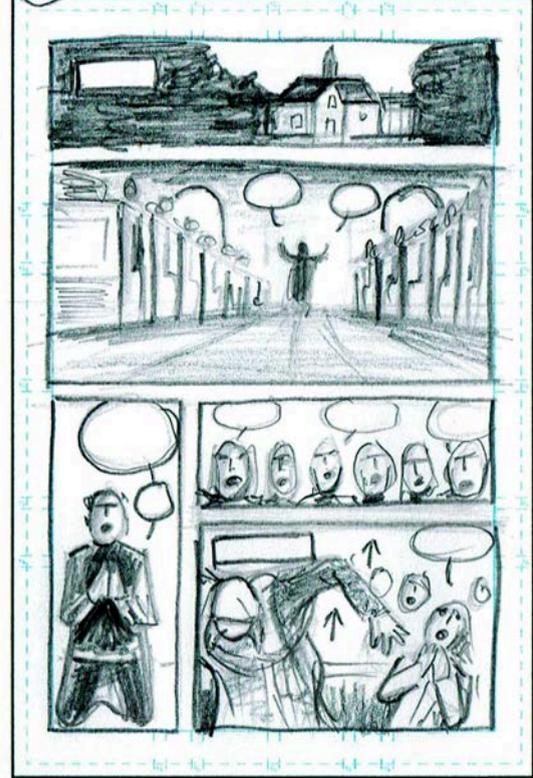
5 THUMBNAILS/DRAFT LAYOUT



PENCILS



9 THUMBNAILS/DRAFT LAYOUT



PENCILS



5 TONED



5 FINAL COLOURS & LETTERING



9 TONED



9 FINAL COLOURS & LETTERING



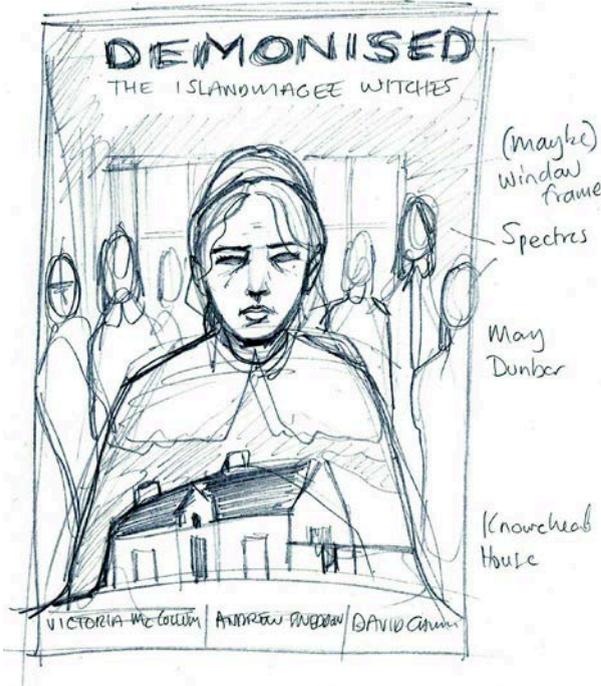
The comic art process involved creating thumbnails and layouts based on the script, then pencils, tones/blue scheme and lettering. I didn't ink the pages as I wanted to keep the raw, textured feel of the pencils.



COVER DRAFTS



Mary Dunbar was always featured in the early drafts of the cover, being such a prominent character in the story, so it was just a case of deciding what other elements to include. Knowehead House is the obvious choice of location to feature, then we ended up with a framing device of a old, decaying window, with a bold background colour to pop the figure out. We kept a more simple layout and moved away from the idea of showing a selection of the spectres.



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