

The Transition of Mother Madge

Everyone was now aware of Mother Madge. The campaigners had made sure of that.

Their case, that she was an innocent victim, one who had been condemned because she was strange, because she was an outsider, and most of all because she was a woman, had made a real impact, both locally in Abershee and across Scotland. Madge was just another of the many innocent souls who had been murdered during the religious mania of the witch hunts.

There was a story that Mother Madge's remains had been left hanging on the gibbet for months after her execution, a warning to others who might embrace the dark arts. Eventually, it was said, her remains had been removed and burned. The ashes were then taken by boat deep into Abershee Bay and scattered over the angry waters. Most of the tourist guidebooks took this line. Local people, however, preferred the tales of Madge's Door. This alternative story appeared on the community website

Madge's Door is a large boulder, once a glacial erratic, that sits, like a stopper in a bottle, against the opening of an old mine level on Abershee Muir (There had been primitive mining for silver here in the 1500s). It is said that around 1654 Mother Madge was identified as a witch. The terrified woman was seized by the townspeople and hurled into the mine workings. Before the people could manhandle the great rock into place, Madge was heard to curse the parish and to promise that her spirit would wreak hellish havoc on the community and its people.

Some say that her wailing and crying could be heard, for weeks and weeks, after the stone was rolled over the entrance. Perhaps they can be heard still...

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Historians generally agreed that this was a tale invented later to tie the legend of Mother Madge to the local silver mines and to a boulder that had probably been rolled there to prevent people from getting stuck in the shaft. But it was the story that was popular in the area and the campaigners, few of whom were local, seized on it as symbolically useful. Remove the stone and Mother Madge would be freed, so to speak.

Jane McLeod *was* local, chair of Abershee Community Council, mother of young twins and wife of Sam, a local secondary teacher. She had taken a break from her job as a Health and Safety Officer to spend time with her children. When Severin Connell, the head of the campaign group, came to see her, she responded more as a representative of her profession than of the Community Council. 'Won't it be dangerous to remove the boulder, even if it's possible? We have no idea how steep the shaft is.'

'There will be no danger of that,' said Connell, a suave yet tweedy middle-aged man. 'We'll have tradesmen there when the boulder is removed to measure the gap and estimate for metal bars to be fitted. Then it'll be boarded up and cordoned off until the work can be carried out.'

Jane smiled as she poured more tea for Connell; 'So Mother Madge will still be confined underground, only by bars, not a stone?'

Connell rolled his eyes. 'Well, she's not *down* there anyway, is she? This will be a symbolic act, a release from her metaphorical prison, proclaiming her innocence and setting her memory free. This will be a powerful *visual* feminist statement about the historic oppression of women by the mumbo-jumbo of religion.' He calmed down a bit, sipped some tea and continued, 'The stone will be left on display and there will be an information board giving the history and background.'

There was a brief silence and then in a spirit of devilment Jane asked, 'What if she *wasn't* innocent?'

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‘Really, Jane; of *course* she was innocent. There *were* no witches. The very idea that she might have been one is just the sort of nonsense we want to silence.’ Connell was just as dogmatic as those enemies he had imagined into being, Jane thought.

At the last Community Council meeting Jane had accepted the job of sorting through the former burgh archives of Abershee to try to find material about Mother Madge. For generations the town had resisted sending local documents to the National Records of Scotland and they were stored in large cardboard boxes the size of tea chests in a neglected cupboard at the back of the council offices. But they were an uncatalogued mess, just heaped into the boxes. Some councillors, typical of the breed, had suggested burning them to free up space. Jane would have to sort through the box with the faded label ‘PRE-1707’ and create order.

She got permission to take the box home. She opened it in the study and one glance told her how hopelessly chaotic were the contents. She spread out an old sheet on the carpet and Sam helped her to upend the box so that the contents fluttered out like dying birds. The room took on the sour taint of oldness and decay. Jane looked at the pyramid of soiled, yellowing documents, sat at a plain, empty table, and began to sort through them, handful by handful.

The task took several weeks. Sometimes, if Sam had time off from marking, he would help. The children were kept strictly away from the study or they could have wreaked havoc with the community’s pre-Union history. Jane managed to categorise the materials as she went and put them in nice, tidy box files. At least some of Abershee’s records were now being recorded and catalogued for free. Most of it was dull stuff; legal agreements, petty burgh court proceedings and documents drawn up by lawyers about disputes. Despite this, Jane found that she was enjoying herself. Her degree had been in History and now she was a practising, if unpaid, historian. These papers, she told herself, are *primary sources*.

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When she was perhaps two-thirds of the way through the pile, she came to a bundle of papers wrapped in a crinkly sheet of foolscap and secured by faded pink ribbons that disintegrated as she untied them. The foolscap wrapper had writing on it, a large sloping hand in sepia-coloured ink. It read;

Informations pertaining to the matter

of Matthew Madge

notorious WARLOCK and WITCH

'Matthew'?

The first page was a kind of foreword that summarised the contents;

Matthew Madge was an Inglis man quhilk cam to Abershie in the year 1652 o Our Lord. It was observit that hee did not attend the kirk. Hee practised as a general tradesman but hee was a necromancer quhilk servit the devell.

Mother Madge was a *man*? That blew apart several centuries of myth, not to mention Severin's feminist critique of the events. She read some of the documents and learned how this Madge - a man's surname, not a woman's first name - rose in Abershee society and became a Baillie, despite his not being generally liked. It was transformative stuff. Madge was not a weak, persecuted woman, but, rather, a powerful man.

'Look, we still have all the traditions and stories about Mother Madge, gathered over hundreds of years. This is just one piece of evidence...'

'Actually it's lots of separate pieces of evidence and I haven't even nearly finished yet.'

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‘Well, anyway, until we have *conclusive* evidence that Madge wasn’t a woman...’

‘We have it already.’ Jane tried to be firm but friendly. She and Severin were in the Abershee Community café amid the clattering of crockery and smells of cake and coffee. ‘I already have dozens of documents, from various sources, who call Madge ‘Matthew’ and refer to him as a man. And I’ve more to go through, like I said.’

Severin thought for a few moments and then said, ‘Well, possibly we can recast the campaign in terms of its mythology, rather than the evidence. The witch myth has been used to put women down for centuries, whatever gender Madge actually was.’ Jane said nothing.

Later that week, heavy lifting equipment rumbled across Abershee Muir on caterpillar tracks. The vehicles still had to be rescued from boggy sections a couple of times but eventually reached Madge’s Door safely. The stone was laboriously prised away and moved a few yards from the opening. The shaft was smaller than expected, barely four feet high and much clogged with vegetation. It seemed level for the first few yards, anyway, but it presumably descended deep into the earth at some point.

A couple of joiners were on hand and they worked quickly to board up the shaft entrance. ‘Nae witches yet,’ one of them felt light enough to remark. A circle of chain-link fencing was placed round the site and then everyone left, after glancing towards the now forlorn-looking boulder. It hadn’t been secured; how could anyone steal *that*? Jane wondered how the 17th century villagers had managed to move it in the first place.

According to tradition, in 1654 Mother Madge was accused of being a witch by the religious authorities. She was thrown into this former mineshaft to die, with the nearby boulder closing off the shaft. For centuries, stories such as this were used to demonise

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and subdue women. This site is now a memorial to all women who were the innocent victims of religious zealots.

'That's the text for the display board,' said Severin, passing a typescript to Jane.

'Madge *was* a man, you know.'

'Yes, I accept that now, Jane,' said Severin, in what he perhaps imagined was a generous spirit. 'At no place in the inscription have I... have *we* asserted Madge's gender. We just stress the terrible treatment women have received down the ages.'

There was a document Jane had to show Severin, but in this moment of his imagined triumph, she couldn't bring herself to do so.

Before work began to install a tight grille of metal bars across the shaft mouth, one of the workmen was securely belayed (to the large boulder, as it happened) in order to examine the interior of the shaft. He crawled in, his torch beam darting about like a wartime searchlight. 'Level for a bit, a *good* bit, and then it seems to drop suddenly,' came his voice. 'Wait - there's something in here...' And then he let out a cry. 'Bodies! There are *bodies!*'

There were two small, complete, but very decayed skeletons, lying flat, spread slightly by the shifting of time and perhaps - uncomfortable thought - the feasting of subterranean animals. Severin phoned Jane. 'I expected it,' she said. 'You'd better come round.' It was time to show him the documents.

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Jane's study was now lined with box files, most of the pre-1707 archive corralled into categories. She handed Severin a single crisp, browning, handwritten document. Severin couldn't read the handwriting, though, so Jane took it back and read:

That devell, that Matthew Madge, that has cam to our toun and brocht sin and death!
Two innocent bairns, Mercy Buchanan (dauchter o our belovit minister Revd Andrew Buchanan) and Simon Baillie, baith 7 years auld, were taken from their homes to the great distress of their parents. Nane kens quhilk sufferings they had. Their puir bodies have never been found. Some witnesses said that the children were seen following Matthew Madge to the Muir. And when folk o the toun went there, they found a great rock shiftit before the old silver shaft, aiblins in mockery o our Lord's tomb. Nane could in any wise move the rock away. Some said they could hear bairns cryin within. How did any chiel move that great stane tae the level? And quhilk power did they use?

Madge stole a small fishing boat from the harbour and sailed out o Abershie Bay and there was nae thing a body could do, for hee had wisely chosen the swiftest boat and in his handlin o it hee showed himsel a proper seaman.

That was ae week ago and hee has no been seen since. I fear hee will no be seen again nor face justice. This is my testimony

Fergus Barclay, Baillie.

'The origins of both tales, the burial in the shaft and the scattering of ashes in the bay are here. Other documents support this story. Over time, details like the hanging were added and the story, even Madge's gender, became corrupted and confused. It happens.'

Severin shook his head. 'The greater truths are still true. Women victimised by religion. Our display will be a testimony to this.'

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'The local minister was a victim here - he lost his daughter. Other witnesses suggest he was deliberately targeted.'

Weeks later, Sam and Jane took an early evening walk to the site. It was now early summer and the ground had firmed and the raw wounds of the caterpillar tracks had healed and greened. However, a dark drizzle fell, rattling on Gore-Tex like machine-gun fire. Severin's information board sat at an angle on a metal framework just in front of the securely-barred opening. Severin's wording had been retained in full and there was a crude cartoonish depiction of a ragged old woman being coerced into the shaft by stern-faced men carrying Bibles.

Sam stood in front of the boulder and placed a hand on it. 'How could anyone move this thing, long before the days of heavy lifting gear?'

'What did he do to those children? I don't like it here any more, Sam.'

Some mysteries would stay mysteries. Perhaps it was better that way.

They walked away across the moorland path, now surfaced with gravel, not looking back. The two 17th century bairns were being buried in a few days' time. Sam and Jane had been given the job of composing a eulogy for the service in the kirk that would precede the burial. It was hard to think of things to say.

A wicked tug of wind came at them from the sea.