

Dame Alice Kyteler

THE KILKENNY SORCERESS (1324)

Although traditionally witches were hanged throughout the British Isles (with the exception of Scotland), the first actual witch burning took place in Ireland. And, just to confuse matters even further, it was not the alleged witch who was burnt but rather her servant. The year was 1324 and the place was the then wealthy town of Kilkenny.

Of course the burning predates any formal witchcraft statute in the country and therefore relies on ecclesiastical law (which treated witchcraft as heresy) rather than English common law (which treated it as a felony). Still, the case was characterised by the same petty jealousies and personal spites which were symptomatic of later, English trials. There was also the added dimension of a struggle for power between the religious and secular authorities, in a wealthy merchant town and in a country that was going through a period of transition and consolidation.

Kilkenny was a thriving and prosperous town. It had grown from a settlement around a monastery founded by St Canice (c.AD514-598/600) who had been reputedly born in the Roe

Valley in County Derry but had travelled south bringing the Gospel with him and founding churches and religious houses. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the town was a Norman one, having received its first Charter in 1208, granted by William the Marshal, the Earl of Pembroke, and for a long time it was the centre of important decisions for the area and for most of Ireland as well. It was from here that the incoming English planters issued statutes that governed many of their relationships with the native Irish. And the monastic tradition still seems to have been very strong in the area – Kilkenny was certainly a base for the important Diocese of Ossory. As Kilkenny began to develop as a trading town, with many artisans setting up business there, the secular and the religious authorities, both regulating various aspects of everyday life, must have come into conflict.

The underlying tensions between Church and State came to something of a head with the accusations of witchcraft that appeared in the town early in the fourteenth century and which centred around a prominent woman in the community.

Although she has sometimes been portrayed as an old, shrivelled hag, Dame Alice Kyteler (or Kettle) was probably nothing of the kind. Indeed, she was in all likelihood quite a handsome woman, as evidenced by the fact that she was married four times, on each occasion to prominent Norman noblemen. Her first husband, William Outlawe, was a town banker, by whom she bore a son, also

called William. This husband seems to have died rather mysteriously and very soon afterwards Dame Alice got married again – this time to the wealthy Adam de Blund of Callan, to whom she seems to have borne more children. Once again, he died quickly and mysteriously, leaving Dame Alice free to take a third husband, Richard de Valle. Some time after he, too, took sick and died and following his demise Dame Alice began to look around for another husband. This time it was Sir John le Poer, a wealthy landowner. By now, the sequential deaths of Dame Alice's unfortunate husbands were becoming a source of some scandal in Kilkenny and a number of questions were being asked. Even before she had married, Alice seems to have been a reasonably prosperous woman but the estates of three husbands had enriched her considerably.

It was not long before Dame Alice's fourth husband began to show signs of illness. He appears to have become weak and sickly and, fearing he was dying, resolved to change his will in order to provide for his widow. Included in this settlement, it appears, was a provision for Dame Alice's eldest and allegedly favourite son, William Outlawe. Sir John had been married before and had a family from his previous marriage who were not at all pleased at being ousted from their inheritance by this now-suspicious lady and her son. They approached a leading churchman, Richard de Ledrede, an English-born Franciscan friar who was Bishop of Ossory, and laid a charge in front of him that something was not right and that their stepmother had somehow 'bewitched' their father and had

made him 'take leave of his senses'. It was also hinted that Dame Alice might have poisoned her three previous husbands. In medieval Ireland (as in England) the term 'poisoner' was usually synonymous with 'witch', since both implied an arcane knowledge of herbs and philtres. De Ledrede promised that he would investigate.

On a diocesan visit to Kilkenny in 1324, he convened a Court of Inquisition, which comprised five knights and several nobles, to examine the facts of the case. It seems, according to some sources, that de Ledrede was determined to establish the rule of the Church in an increasingly wealthy but secularised Kilkenny and that he was obsessed with the occult and with witchcraft. The Kyteler case allowed him to give vent to both of these obsessions.

After much deliberation, presumably guided by the bishop, the Inquisition reached a somewhat startling conclusion. There was, it declared, a coven or band of 'heretical sorcerers' actively operating in the town of Kilkenny, the head of whom was Dame Alice herself. No doubt inspired by de Ledrede, the Inquisition laid the following charges against them.

That they had denied the faith of Christ absolutely, for a year or a month, according to the value or importance of the object which they desired to gain through sorcery. During all that period they believed in none of the doctrines of the Church and they did not adore the Body of Christ, nor did they enter a sacred building or hear the Mass or receive or make use of the Sacraments.

That they offered sacrifices to demons of living animals, which they dismembered and then scattered at the cross-roads in honour of a certain spirit 'of low rank' which was named as Robin, Son of Art (or Artisson).

That they had sought, by their sorcery, advice, encouragement and responses from demons.

That they had blasphemously imitated the power of the Church by imposing, by the light of three tallow candles, a sentence of excommunication against their own husbands from the soles of their feet to the crowns of their heads, specifically naming each part of the body and then concluding the 'service' by extinguishing the candles and by crying '*Fi! Fi! Fi! Amen!*'

That in order to arouse feelings of love or hatred, or to inflict death or disease upon the bodies of the faithful, they made use of powders, unguents, ointments and candles of fat which were made up as follows. They took the entrails of cocks sacrificed to demons, 'certain horrible worms', various unspecified herbs, dead men's nails, the hair, brains and shreds of the cerements of boys who were buried unbaptised, with other abominations, all of which they cooked with various incantations, over a fire of oak logs in a vessel made out of the skull of a decapitated thief.

The children of Dame Alice's four husbands had accused her of having harmed their fathers by sorcery and poison and of having brought, by the use of potions and powders, John le Poer to a state whereby he had become terribly

emaciated, his nails had dropped off and there was no hair left on his body. He had at this stage been warned of Dame Alice's magic by a maidservant and had given into the hands of the bishop via certain priests, a sackful of 'horrible and detestable things'. Dame Alice was further accused of muddling her husbands' minds by sorcery so that they bequeathed all their wealth to her favourite son, William Outlawe.

It was also alleged that the male demon known as Robin, Son of Art, or Artisson, was Dame Alice's incubus and that he had had carnal knowledge of her, and furthermore that she had admitted that it was from him that she received her wealth. This minor demon was said to have made frequent and often violent appearances in various forms, sometimes as a cat, sometimes as a fierce and hairy black dog, and sometimes in the guise of a Negro ('Æthiops') accompanied by two other devils that were usually larger and taller than he, one of whom carried an iron rod. These demons, it was said, were conjured up by sacrificing fowls (nine red cocks) and the offering of peacocks' eyes.

Several worthy people of Kilkenny, no doubt with the guidance of de Ledrede, stated that they had seen Dame Alice sweeping the streets of the town with a long broom between the hours of sunset and sunrise. As she raked all the muck and filth from the street, these witnesses claimed that they heard her repeat the following incantation:

*'To the house of William my sonne
Hie all the wealth of Kilkennie towne'.*

The accusations reflect the paranoia of the Continental notions of witchcraft – the coven (gathering) of witches meeting to do harm to their community; sacrifices to Satan of animals; the ghastly ingredients of their unguents and candles; the suggestion that Dame Alice had sexual intercourse with a male demon; the suggestion that the sorcerers mocked the rituals of the Christian Mass with their blasphemies – all of these were the stock-in-trade of the early Continental Christian writers on witchcraft. They also probably reflected the mind of de Ledrede himself.

As soon as the Inquisition reached its conclusions, Bishop de Ledrede immediately wrote to the Prior of Kilmainham and Chancellor of Ireland, Roger Outlawe, requesting that a number of persons, including Dame Alice and her son, be arrested on charges of witchcraft. As his surname suggests, Roger Outlawe was a close relative of Dame Alice's first husband and therefore also of her son William.

Outraged by the accusations against him, William Outlawe formed a group of influential figures to resist the bishop's demands. Among these was Sir Arnold le Poer who was probably a kinsman of Dame Alice's fourth husband and also Seneschal of Kilkenny. As one of the leading administrators and public figures of the town, his inclusion in the opposition to de Ledrede was significant.

Replying to the bishop, Chancellor Outlawe pointed out that an arrest warrant could not be issued until the accused had been formally excommunicated by the Church for forty

days. At the same time, Sir Arnold wrote to de Ledrede asking him to withdraw the case or else ignore or forget about it. This was to mark the start of a struggle between the two men – reflecting the struggle between the secular and religious powers for control of Kilkenny.

Incensed by the seneschal's suggestion that he should 'ignore' such a grave religious matter as witchcraft and stung by the chancellor's indifference, de Ledrede took matters into his own hands and summonsed the Dame, who was then residing with her son William within the Kilkenny boundary, to appear before him and to give an account of herself. Not surprisingly, Dame Alice chose to ignore the summons and fled to relatives in England, well beyond de Ledrede's reach, whereupon the bishop promptly excommunicated her. However her son, William Outlawe, remained in Kilkenny and it was towards him that a frustrated de Ledrede now turned his attention. He cited William for heresy, instructing him to appear before him within seventeen days.

At this, William and Sir Arnold came to the Priory of Kells where de Ledrede was holding a Visitation and Sir Arnold demanded, as seneschal, that he should proceed no further with the allegations. Finding any pleading with the bishop fruitless, the seneschal threatened the bishop with arrest. Going back to Kilkenny, he made good this threat and, as Bishop de Ledrede left Kells, he was met by the Sheriff of the area and Bailiff of the Cantred of Overk, Stephen le Poer, accompanied by a party of armed men who immediately

arrested him on the seneschal's orders. He was taken back to Kilkenny under armed guard and thrown into the jail.

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Not surprisingly, the arrest and imprisonment caused great interest and controversy all around Kilkenny and a number of churchmen flocked to the jail to offer support to the bishop. In his official status, the bishop placed an interdict on Kilkenny, which meant that none of the leading figures of the town – those who had been involved in de Ledrede's arrest – could receive the Sacrament. However, it also meant that no Mass could be said in the town until the interdict was lifted. De Ledrede himself made a great show of receiving the sacraments of the Church himself and a Dominican friar preached a sermon in front of Kilkenny jail, taking as his text *Blessed are they which are persecuted*. Fearing a popular revolt in the town, William Outlawe urged Sir Arnold to keep the bishop under closer restraint and this the seneschal did for a time, but he later nervously revoked his instruction, allowing de Ledrede to have companions with him, both day and night, and to receive visitors when he wished. He was also allowed to have servants and to receive the Sacrament, if and when he desired. The bishop was now becoming something of a martyr figure.

Seventeen days passed and de Ledrede remained in custody. By now the seventeen days which he had given William Outlawe to appear before him had passed. Sir Arnold, feeling

that he had achieved what he had set out to do, sent his uncle, Miler le Poer, the Bishop of Leighlin, together with the Sheriff of Kilkenny to set the prisoner free. Still fearing a riot, Miler le Poer asked de Ledrede to leave quietly and without fuss, hopefully by the back door of the jail, but de Ledrede, now full of pious indignation, refused. He would not sneak out, he declared, like some common felon, he would leave like the bishop that he was. Attired in his full pontificals and accompanied by a great throng of clergy and townspeople, he made his way from the jail to St Canice's Cathedral in the town to give thanks to God for his release. At the doors of the church, he demanded that William Outlawe present himself before him to answer a charge of witchcraft. It seemed that William had no other option but to comply.

The day before he was due to appear, however, the bizarre story took another twist. Bishop de Ledrede himself was cited to appear before an ecclesiastical court in Dublin to answer a charge of having unlawfully placed an interdict on the town of Kilkenny. At the bottom of this, probably, lay manoeuvrings by Sir Arnold and his associates but this could not be proved. The bishop pleaded that he could not attend, as he would have to travel to Dublin through lands which were held by Sir Arnold and that he feared for his life. The seneschal, however, seized the opportunity to convene a court himself to try the bishop for his unlawful conduct.

The seneschal's court was held at Easter 1324 (de Ledrede had been arrested during Lent) and although the bishop

turned up for it, he was denied entrance. Not to be deterred, however, he forced his way into the courtroom, fully robed and carrying the Sacrament in a golden vase. As it was Easter, he elevated the Host and amidst the prayers and hymns of his followers, he demanded that the seneschal, the bailiffs and the court give him a fair hearing. This was eventually granted, although allegedly with an ill will from Sir Arnold.

The court then descended into an unedifying spectacle that did neither the Church nor the civil authorities any credit. In fact, it degenerated into a shouting match with one side trying to outdo the other in trading insults. Sir Arnold, for example, referred to the bishop as ‘that vile, rustic, interloping monk with dirty hands’ and refused to hear anything that de Ledrede said or to grant him any aid whilst in court. The proceedings were adjourned before violence broke out.

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In the interim, Dame Alice Kyteler herself, who seems to have taken a peripheral role in these events, had not been idle. She had returned from England to Dublin, where she lobbied the archbishop to convene a court against de Ledrede for having unlawfully excommunicated her on an unproven charge of witchcraft. De Ledrede presented himself to the archbishop’s court and was found to have acted ‘in error’ and was forced to lift the excommunication. However, after hearing of the almost comical proceedings in Kilkenny, the archbishop had stern words for Sir Arnold le Poer. The seneschal

was humbled and was forced to apologise to the bishop for the wrongs that he had done him. In the presence of the assembled prelates, he was obliged to offer de Ledrede the kiss of peace, which the other (somewhat unwillingly) accepted.

Bishop de Ledrede, however, was not a man to give up easily. Returning from Dublin to Kilkenny, he immediately wrote to the chancellor, Roger Outlawe, directing that he arrest Dame Alice (still in Dublin), and also to the Vicar General of the Archbishop of Dublin, demanding that she be returned to Kilkenny to answer the witchcraft charges. Dame Alice seems to have got wind of these letters and once again made her escape to England, this time never to return. Behind her, however, the witchcraft allegations persisted.

On de Ledrede's orders, several of her alleged confederates were arrested as witches and thrown into prison. A good number of them came from a relatively poor or 'middling sort' of background and, as such, offered little resistance. Their names were: Robert of Bristol, a clerk; Petronilla of Meath, who had been a personal servant to Dame Alice, and her daughter Sarah; John, Ellen and Syssock Galrussyn; Annota Lange, Eva de Brownestown, William Payne de Boly and Alice, the wife of Henry Faber.

Returning from a visit to Dublin, the bishop went straight to Kilkenny prison and interviewed all the prisoners who admitted their guilt straightaway, confessing their blasphemous crimes and mentioning others, which had not been specified. Dame Alice, they all declared, had been 'the

mother and mistress of them all'. There is little doubt that all of them were terrified and would readily have admitted to anything, and no doubt de Ledrede 'guided' all their confessions. Armed with this 'evidence', the bishop then wrote to Roger Outlawe, as Chancellor of Ireland, requesting that all the witches be lodged in jail pending their trial. This may have included William Outlawe, Dame Alice's son. The chancellor refused to issue the necessary warrant, probably on the unstated grounds that William was a relative and a close friend. Bishop de Ledrede then obtained it through the Justiciary of Ireland, who consented to deal with the case when he came to Kilkenny. Dame Alice's son, however, was not named.

Before the Justiciary's arrival, the bishop requested that William Outlawe appear before him at St Mary's Church to answer charges of witchcraft. William certainly appeared there but he was accompanied by a band of men, all armed to the teeth. Unperturbed by this show of force, Bishop de Ledrede formally denounced him as a witch and a heretic and accused him of favouring, receiving and defending heretics, as well as of usury, perjury, adultery, clericide and a number of other crimes and blasphemies. In all, the bishop accused him of thirty-four crimes against the laws of man and of God, to which he was not permitted to respond until the Justiciary had arrived in Kilkenny. When the lawman reached the town, he was accompanied by Chancellor Outlawe and the Irish Treasurer, Walter de Islep, as well as the King's Council and

several other notable legal men. In front of this august company, de Ledrede recited a list of charges against Dame Alice and with the common consent of all those lawyers present, she was declared to be a sorceress and a heretic. Emboldened, de Ledrede demanded that she now should be handed over to the secular arm for trial wherever she resided (this was not done) and that her goods and chattels should be confiscated (this apparently was done on 2 July 1324). On the same day, de Ledrede lit a great fire in the central market square of the town and with great ceremony burned a sackful of materials that were believed to contain ointments, powders, philtres, dead men's fingernails, worms, spiders, the fat of murdered infants and 'other abominations'. These were the items which he had received from Dame Alice's fourth husband, John le Poer, after the latter had ransacked her house. The bishop declared that the Dame also had a staff on which she 'ambled and galloped through thick and thinne' but he had not been able to locate its whereabouts.

Triumphant and seemingly filled with a holy zeal, de Ledrede now called upon William Outlawe to appear before him on his knees to show abject contrition for his former sins. At first Outlawe refused and in this he was backed by the chancellor and the treasurer, but so great was de Ledrede's following in the town that he was finally compelled to do so. By way of a penance, the bishop ordered that he attend at least three Masses every day for a year; that he had to feed a certain number of the poor and that he had to repair the roof of the

chancel of St Canice's Cathedral from the belfry eastward and to reroof the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin, all at his own expense. William agreed to do all of this but soon neglected his obligations and was promptly thrown into prison.

Having dealt satisfactorily with Dame Alice and her son, Bishop de Ledrede turned his attention to her alleged accomplices. How he dealt with them, and their eventual fate, is unknown – except in one instance. The unfortunate Petronilla of Meath, who had been Dame Alice's close servant, was now made a scapegoat for her absent mistress. It was against her that the bishop ordered his most stringent torture – perhaps because she had also been friendly with Dame Alice. She was flogged a number of times and terrible tortures were used to extract a confession from her. In the face of such pain, she made frequent admissions of diabolical guilt. She had, she confessed, denied her faith and had sacrificed to specific demons, most notably Robin, Son of Art, and through his magic, she had caused certain women whom she knew (and probably disliked) to appear as if they had goat's horns on their foreheads. Not surprisingly, she confirmed de Ledrede's allegations that the Dame had frequently consulted with demons of the most hideous sort and stated that although she (Petronilla) was a sorceress and extremely able in the Black Arts, she was nothing as compared to Dame Alice herself, from whom she had learned all her diabolical knowledge. Indeed, the unfortunate servant avowed, there were fewer magicians in all the world more capable in evil

ways than the Dame. Petronilla also, unsurprisingly, declared that William Outlawe deserved death as much as she did, for he had observed and, on occasion, taken part in the worship of demons. For a year and a day he had further worn the Devil's Girdle (a magical belt) about his body to give him secular power.

Acting on information given to them by the tortured victims, de Ledrede's followers again searched Dame Alice's house where they found, hidden away, the greasy staff by means of which she 'ambled and galloped through thick and thinne where and in what manner she listed', a pipe of infernal ointment and a Sacramental Wafer which had the Devil's name stamped on it instead of that of Jesus Christ. This was the final proof of all their guilt. On the orders of Bishop de Ledrede, Petronilla was condemned to be burnt alive and the sentence was carried out 'with all due solemnity' in Kilkenny on Sunday, 3 November 1324.

The execution of the unfortunate Petronilla is the only record of a burning that we have in the case. There is no evidence of what happened to her co-accused, though it is highly possible that a number of them were burned as well. Indeed, there were suggestions that Petronilla's execution was the beginning rather than the end of the affair. An unnamed writer of the time who chronicled these events states: 'With regard to the other heretics and sorcerers who belonged to the pestilential society of Robin, son of Art, the order of law being preserved, some of them were publicly burnt to

death; others, confessing their crimes in the presence of all the people, in an upper garment, were marked back and front with a cross after they had abjured their heresy, as is the custom; others were solemnly whipped through the town and the market-place; others were banished from the city and diocese; others who evaded the jurisdiction of the Church were excommunicated, while others again fled in fear and were never heard of after. And thus, by the authority of Holy Mother Church, and by the special grace of God, that most foul brood was scattered and destroyed.'

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Bishop de Ledrede, however, was still not completely satisfied. Arnold le Poer, who had made life difficult for him, had thrown him into prison and slandered him at the Easter court, was next to be attacked. The bishop had him excommunicated and committed as a prisoner to Dublin Castle. Le Poer had the sympathy of many prominent people including Roger Outlawe, the chancellor. Outlawe, who was later to be appointed Justiciary of Ireland in 1328, showed the seneschal great kindness and treated him with leniency. This, of course, enraged de Ledrede and he actually accused the chancellor of heresy and of 'harbouring sorcerers'. The fires of the witchcraft scandal had clearly not died down in the bishop's breast. There was of course, no basis for de Ledrede's frenzied allegations and a subsequent committee of venerable clerics found Outlawe innocent of the charges, in return for

which he prepared them all a sumptuous banquet, much to the bishop's displeasure. Sir Arnold le Poer was not so fortunate. He died whilst still in prison in 1331 and because he was still under excommunication, his body lay unburied for a long time. It seemed that the bishop had won most of his battles but there was still one final twist to be played out.

Shortly after Sir Arnold's death, Bishop de Ledrede found *himself* accused of heresy by a leading churchman, Alexander de Bicknor. The bishop immediately appealed to the Holy See and set out for Rome to declare his innocence. He was to be away from his diocese for quite some time and suffered many hardships on his journey. Whilst he was gone, the Crown seized his temporal lands, forcing him to return. He managed to regain his property in 1339 but ten years later a further charge of heresy against him was made directly to the English king, Edward III, and his lands were confiscated yet again. He was also threatened by a number of measures which might have even affected his bishopric. By 1356, however, some kind of peace had been restored and he looked reasonably secure once more. Nevertheless, he had not recovered all his lands.

Although the storm generated by the Kyteler case had more or less blown over, de Ledrede was still not a happy man. His long and turbulent episcopate ended with his death in 1360. He was buried in the chancel of St Canice's Cathedral on the north side of the high altar. With his death, the first recorded case of Irish witchcraft and the ill feeling that it had generated

and which had rumbled on for decades finally came to an end.

Did Dame Alice actually practise the things of which she was accused? Whether or not her alleged spells and rituals were successful, did she actually *believe* herself to be an instrument of Satan and so inspire those who were accused with her? These events happened so many centuries ago that it is impossible for us to know the exact truth of the circumstances. Richard de Ledrede clearly pursued her and her accomplices with the full weight of ecclesiastical law. Certainly, the bishop seems to have been a somewhat unsympathetic character — single-minded, overbearing and dictatorial, utterly convinced of the supremacy of the laws of the Church, which he represented, over those of the State.

And yet, Richard de Ledrede may have been no more than a churchman who was representative of his time. A number of commentators have pointed out that the appointment of de Ledrede to the See of Ossory coincided with the elevation of the paranoid John XXII to the Papacy. The French Pope (1316-1334) had, perhaps justifiably, an inordinate fear of the political intrigues that were besetting the Papacy, and believed that witchcraft was being used as an instrument against him. Consequently, from around 1320 onwards, in a series of Papal Bulls, he anathematised sorcery and authorised strenuous persecutions of suspected witches by churchmen as part of their mission. Witchcraft had now been formally identified by the Holy Father as a cancer blighting society and the merest hint of it must be rooted out.

But probably the real basis for the accusations against Dame Alice was no more than the petty spites and jealousies of disgruntled stepchildren who believed that she had cheated them out of their rightful inheritance. Family hatreds and quarrels must have boiled over as William Outlawe assumed the wealth and property which others felt should have been rightfully theirs. In such circumstances, the accusation of witchcraft provided a ready and easy weapon. The bishop's own character simply stirred the embers of discontent into a fire of alleged heresy.

The Kyteler case is still remembered, especially around Kilkenny. Today there is even a public house in the town which bears the name The Kyteler Inn and tourist companies sometimes include Kilkenny on their routes as a 'witch town', and as the site of one of the earliest witch-burnings. Even in the twenty-first century, almost eight hundred years after the awful events, the Dame can still cast a long shadow.