

Agnes Samson. Wise Woman... Witch?

JENNY LESLIE

Agnes tells her story

I live in a cottage near Kieth in Scotland. It's much the same as the other cottages from the outside; made with wattle and daub with a timber frame and a thatched roof. But inside it is different. When you first come in you can't see much as it is rather dark, but soon you will sense a different scent. Instead of wood smoke, you can smell lavender in some areas and lemon in others. I have bunches of dried lavender and lemon balm hanging from the ceiling. You might find the bunches brush the top of your head; don't be frightened, they are quite harmless, in fact they might do you good. Both lavender and lemon balm are calming and soothing.

'Most cottages like mine have two rooms downstairs and one upstairs. But I have three rooms downstairs. My husband made an extra room for me before he died. In it I store my salves and potions and herbs, when they have dried. I also have a special shelf for amulets; a selection of special stones and seeds that I have collected over the years. When I visit the sick I take a few with me and select a stone or a seed for the poorly person to hold. We say a little prayer over it and they know their stone has helped many others.

'Although some say I am a white witch I prefer to be called a folk healer or wise woman. I like to have a necklace of Angelica around my neck, it protects against illness and is a sure sign that one is not a witch. I come from a long line of folk healers, learning my craft from my father.

'In other ways the inside of my home is very like everyone else's. My daughter and grandchildren live with me, their dolls and small wooden carts are in one corner. In another corner I have my spinning-wheel and a basket of wool.

'It's the year of our Lord 1590. Here in Scotland King James the Sixth is on the throne. But these are turbulent times. In England Queen Elizabeth is on her death bed and who knows who will be her heir. I have heard rumours that King James is very unsettled; there are immense possibilities for him. Could he be King of all of Britain? At the moment he has no Queen, so there is no chance of an heir. The priest at our church here in Kieth, tells me that there are great spiritual storms in Scotland and also in the Netherlands. There seems to be a war between the Catholics and the new Protestants. People have died for their faith. I am worried about our King. He seems so unsure of what he is doing. He is very young. He had such a difficult start in life, being taken away from his mother when he was so little. He must have known something of what was happening to her, but the people who brought him up could have told him terrible stories. In my garden and in my store room I have many things that could help him. Lavender and oats are very useful, fortunately we are not short of oats in Scotland. Skullcap and lime blossom can help with depression.'

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'The most terrible thing has happened, King James has accused me and a group of folk healers of causing a storm that very nearly sunk his ship. I am to appear before King James in Holyrood Castle. I have been to Edinburgh before; I have been called for by a few fine ladies as well as gentle folk to help with their illnesses. But this is entirely different; Holyrood Castle is a grim place. There will be many men in the room as well as King James. I will be the only woman. It is very frightening, but I have faith in the government and I know I only acted for the good.'



Burning a Witch; although this is an impression of the Burning of Joan of Arc it gives a good impression of Agnes's fate.

Agnes's place in history

Agnes stood up to her accuser well, she denied any knowledge of what caused the storm. But later she was taken to the dungeons and tortured. Her interrogators were convinced that 'witches' were not people but the 'Devil'; they were frightened and very determined. They looked for what they called 'the devil's' mark. This involved stripping Agnes and shaving her and prodding her. In the current age this would be called a 'sexual assault'. Agnes's mind and body were broken. She must have been completely terrified at this point and she was forced to confess under duress; Agnes said that 200 witches had gathered to call up the storm. It is difficult to imagine what Agnes felt at this time, all that she relied on through her whole life had fallen away. It is likely she felt completely alienated and in great dread. This so-called confession led eventually to the arrest and death of thousands of women over the next three generations. After a trial Agnes was sentenced to death, she was strangled and burnt at the stake. This was the start of a hundred years of persecution in Scotland and Great Britain.

This terrible situation grew out of a number of factors. The Reformation had caused conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the whole of Europe. The beliefs of the people were very

black and white; Heaven and Hell were to them a reality. Recent research mentioned in the recent Radio 4 programme 'The Witches' presented by India Rakusen, suggests that women like Agnes, who were folk healers and midwives, may also have performed abortions which could have particularly riled the Catholic Church and caused them to be vehement in the pursuit of 'so-called' justice. King James's personal situation may also have been fragile. The boat that he was in when he was caught in the storm was coming back from the Netherlands. His fiancée Anne of Denmark was still in the Netherlands. All his hopes to have heirs and gain the throne of the whole of Great Britain could have been focused on this ship which was caught in the storm.

My interest in witches and herbalism started in the early 1980's when I was studying herbalism and psychology. The plight of the women folk healers and their terrible persecution caught my interest, partly because they did use traditional herbal remedies that had been developed over many centuries but also they were made scapegoats by people who misunderstood their practices and blamed them for the bad things that were happening. We humans seem particularly prone to blaming and it can have the most terrible consequences as we can see

in Agnes's story and those who came after her. The state of mind that leads to blame on an individual level and also in large groups still fascinates me.

In the early 2000's I began to study art and textiles and I was very interested to hear about an American artist Judy Chicago and her iconic work 'The Dinner Party'. This represents a massive ceremonial banquet with place settings in ceramics and textiles. There are 998 handmade tiles commemorating 39 particular women. Agnes Samson is one of the women honoured in this way. This work is a milestone in 20th Century art and can be seen in Brooklyn Museum USA.

Although the persecution of folk healers and midwives had a very serious effect on the role of the traditional healer with ancient knowledge and experience, the profession of medical Herbalist still lives on and flourishes. Herbalists take a holistic view of a person who comes to them for healing, considering their physical state, their psychological state and their soul. An article in the magazine 'Herbs' is about Jonny Woodall, medical Herbalist. The author writes, 'Jonny's work with patients involves a passion for understanding and integrating the deeper levels

of psychology with the person they want to be. He has an interest in auto-immune diseases, addiction and the energetic use of plants.'

Herbalism, based on science and ancient traditions can be a tremendous source for good in our fractured world.

Sources

* *Old Wives Tales* by Mary Chamberlain

* *The Holistic Herbal* by David Hoffman

* Jonny Woodall, medical Herbalist,
www.jonnysapothecary.com

* Herbs magazine Autumn/Winter 2020 page 25

Jenny has had a life long passion for Nature; she was lucky to train as a gardener at what was Waterperry Horticultural college and then went onto work as a gardener for several decades. She is also interested in the human psyche and creativity and trained and worked as a counsellor and later psychotherapist. A later interest is in art and Jenny has studied textile art and more recently print making. Jenny uses environmentally friendly products for her art work and works with themes that she hopes will promote an interest in Nature. Jenny's current interest is in re-wilding projects and naturalistic gardening.