



# Ecclesiastical deviation in the early 19th century and its traces in scott's st. ronan's well

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**Abstract**— *The present study focuses on the general neglect of church and the unwanted practices that crept into the ecclesiastical system during the early 19th century and the traces that are researched from Sir Walter Scott's novel St. Ronan's Well. The study compasses a general look into the various deviations related to churches and the poor choice of the authorities in appointing Josiah Cargill as the minister of the Parish of St. Ronan's Well. The study aims to bring to light the various ills that creep into a system, underlining the reasons that lead to such deviations and the need to appoint only such individuals who are totally aware of their responsibility towards society.*



**Keywords**— *Ecclesiastical, Walter Scott, Ronan's Well, Church, Josiah Cargill, Minister, Deviat*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Scott<sup>1</sup> has expressed covertly his grave concerns over the growing indiscipline among the ministers of the parish whose prime duty is to overlook the spiritual well being of the parishioners residing in their parish; and not be lax and indifferent to their customary absence from their regular attendance at church. To appreciate what Scott has expressed in a concealed manner in a major part of the novel St. Ronan's Well<sup>2</sup>, it would not be out of the way to go back to the history of the church and try to discover the reasons that culminated in the growing decadence of the local Kirk<sup>3</sup> of Scottish provinces.

## II. BACKGROUND

Even before Scott wrote his great Waverley Novels<sup>4</sup>, the church in Scotland and world over was undergoing a period of decadence and corruption that had begun to grow and unfold in various forms on account of certain practices that set in at different points of time in history; and it is this undulating flow of dynamic church history that is ultimately responsible for finding the church and particularly the Scottish Kirk in the state that it is in today. The general observation about the church, and particularly

in the Scottish provinces is their "laxity of discipline" (Luckock, 1893, p. 99). The King of Scotland, James III<sup>5</sup>, addressed all the abbots and priors of the Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries when it was reported to him that there were certain irregularities in the practices at the churches in Scotland. The address of the King goes as follows, "beseeching them in the bowels of the Lord Jesus Christ, to shake off their torpor and sloth, and set themselves to work to restore their fallen discipline and rekindle their decaying fervour, so they might save their houses from the ruin that menaced them." (Luckock, 1893)

## III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### 3.1 Gravest Deviations

The gravest of errors in the ecclesiastical history of Scotland was effectuated when bishops devoid of a sound moral background were appointed to the post that carried with it the greatest responsibility of rectification of the whole diocese. It is through the questionable conduct of the individual at the helm of affair that immorality began to multiply and grow; and ultimately find its way down to the grass root level where even the village pastor had the

choice of either being an exemplar of sound morality or a figure of questionable character.

This is what Edward Thompson (1878) observes in his book *The sufferings of the Church in Brittany during the great revolution* : “ It cannot, indeed, be denied that worldliness and laxity of morals were but too prevalent among those ecclesiastics who through secular interest or noble birth had attained to high places in the Church, and were thus in a position to exercise a deteriorating influence, not only on the clerical body, but on society at large.” (Thompson, 1878)

Even among these men of authority there were those who stood for the sound cause of goodness and morality and such individuals being few in number; their limited actions of trying to root out corruption from the ecclesiastical system was of no avail.

“Archbishop Foreman<sup>6</sup> called a Synod at S. Andrews, and the statutes that were passed between 1514 and 1521 A.D., while they throw a lurid light on the condition of the clergy,

witness to a determined effort to grapple with the evil.” (Luckock, 1893)

Archbishop Foreman had systematized rules for the clergymen holding posts in the church. Henceforth it was made compulsory for any cleric of the church to reside upon his benefice and any negligence concerning this issue would be dealt with seriously and that would also include a mulling of the fourth part of the income of the cleric who strayed away from the rule.

Another great immoral practice being followed by the resident clergy was that of keeping of concubines and this issue had become common from one century to another and with regard to the curtailment of this abhorred practice, one of the most significant steps to be taken was that, “ those priests who, after a third warning, do not put away their concubines, are to be deprived for ever of the cure of souls ; the rite of purification after childbirth is not to be administered to the concubines of the clergy unless with due security that they will in future withdraw altogether from the illicit union.” (Luckock, 1893)

There was an overall decadence observed in the clergy of those times and this has been expressed very well in the following lines: “ Simony, bribery and general corruption in the government of the Church discounted the high-sounding professions of both clergyman and bishop. There was a widespread decay in honesty and fair dealing : creed and character were divorced as perhaps never before in the history of England.” (Kennedy, 1914)

### 3.2 Neglect of Parochial Structures

The compass of decadence consisted in not just the corruption of the clergy but also the total neglect that had fallen on the buildings concerned with the ecclesiastical setup. The Manse<sup>7</sup> and the Chapel provided towards the running of the Kirk services suffered a great neglect on account of the preoccupation of the higher authorities with activities that were beneficial for personal aggrandizement rather than service to the parishioners of the village.

In *St. Ronan's Well* , Scott speaks of two houses that were still in some shape and hence were being used for habitation. “These were the clergyman's manse, and the village inn.” (Scott, 1906) The Manse it seems was the ugliest and the most inconvenient building for a clergyman to dwell. It had, as usual two chimneys, “rising like asses' ears at either end” (Scott, 1906, p.8) and they obviously served very well the purpose they were meant for

### 3.3 Josiah Cargill - A Poor Ecclesiastical Choice

The gradual decay of the Manse spoke out both in the general appearance and use of the building. Continuous neglect of the structure had made it the prey to the elements that caused “ordinary leaks and inlets”(Scott, 1906) whenever there was a torrential downpour. Since the minister Mr. Josiah Cargill was a bachelor, the pigs roamed about with ease in the garden that surrounded the Manse; the broken window panes gave place to brown paper that hid the shame; the farm house behind had a squalid appearance and it was occupied by a bankrupt tenant. Mr. Joshua Cargill was a scholarly clergyman and a gentleman with rare qualities.

“The Reverend Josiah Cargill, the sad, shy, gifted, amiable, dreary recluse, is another of the admirable Scottish figures who fill up the glowing canvas of St. Ronan's.” (Crockett, 1912)

The Kirk of St. Ronan's, a little decayed building with a clay floor, stood just next to the Manse. It boasted of “an assemblage of wretched pews, originally of carved oak, but heedfully clouded with white fir-deal.” (Scott, 1906) On the other hand, the external appearance of the Kirk was grand in its outline and owed its construction to the Catholic times.

Josiah Cargill, being the offspring of a farmer and endued with an infirm health, was brought up with care; and observing his studious nature was educated in order that he could be a clergyman. He was sweet of disposition and had a mild temper; with a studious temper fit for the acquisition of knowledge, he endeared himself to those similar in nature. About the way that he relaxed his otherwise busy mind was as Scott describes in the following lines: “His sole relaxations were those of a

retiring, mild, and pensive temper, and were limited to a ramble, almost always solitary, among the woods and hills, in praise of which, he was sometimes guilty of a sonnet, but rather because he could not help the attempt, than as proposing to himself the fame or the rewards which attend the successful poet.”(Scott,1906)

Being of a withdrawn nature, and reflective; Cargill had the talent to sketch well the objects that he observed in nature. This rare gift helped him to rise high in the esteem of his teacher; and later paved the way for his becoming a suitable tutor to the children of Mr. Bidmore, who was on a lookout for a tutor who would bestow on his son and daughter the precise knowledge of sketching and painting objects. Mr. Bidmore hence appointed Cargill to teach his children to draw and paint; and It is during this tutorship that he happened to observe the ethereal beauty of the Bidmore girl with whom he fell in love. His love being Platonic, he hardly had the courage to express himself in any way whatsoever to the girl who had enraptured his heart. Scott (1906) puts the feelings of Cargill in a beautiful manner thus: “ But Josiah Cargill was less fortunate, or less cautious. He suffered his fair pupil to become inexpressibly dear to him, before he discovered the precipice towards which he was moving under the direction of a blind and misplaced passion.” (Scott,1906)

After this unsuccessful trial at the hands of love, Cargill fell into a state of melancholy and to extricate himself out of this debilitating state he surrendered himself heart and soul to study. His loneliness was more complete as his ailing mother had passed away after having frequently goaded him to seek a matrimonial alliance with a suitable girl. He had always evaded her with various excuses and now, after her demise, he was left all alone, a bachelor, to look after his own home and hearth. The memory of Augusta Bidmore had faded away and in her place stood “a yet nobler and coyer mistress, in a word, of Knowledge herself.”(Scott,1906)

The Parochial duties of a minister consist in preaching the beliefs of Christianity, aiding the performance of weddings, baptisms, ministering to seriously ailing individuals, and ultimately accepting confessions from those nearing the close of their temporal existence. Cargill, doubtlessly performed his regular duties as a minister with some zeal.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

But, Cargill, as we know, was devoted to the acquisition of knowledge and most hours he would devote to the isolated gathering of wisdom gleaned from bulky tomes that demanded most of his energies. This covetous acquisition of knowledge was at the cost of neglect of society to

whom he was indebted. This knowledge that he was imparting to his hungry intellect should have been shared by him for the benefit of the fellow humans at large. The Knowledge that he was accumulating in his capacious brain should have been imparted to youngsters to inspire them to begin a great quest in the short sojourn of this mortal existence. “But this chase of wisdom, though in itself interesting and dignified, was indulged to an excess which diminished the respectability, nay, the utility, of the deceived student; and he forgot, amid the luxury of deep and dark investigations, that society has its claims, and that the knowledge which is unimparted, is necessarily a barren talent, and is lost to society, like the miser's concealed hoard, by the death of the proprietor.”(Scott,1906)

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