

SARAH SHARP – A DEATH IN THE COTTAGE: SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT IN ROMANTIC-ERA SCOTTISH DEATH NARRATIVES

In the June 1829 edition of one of Britain's most influential periodicals, *The Edinburgh Review*, a hitherto relatively unknown Scottish writer diagnosed a moral crisis. Thomas Carlyle's 'Signs of the Times' argued that Britain's rapid economic development in the preceding decades had led to a spiritual degeneration. The essay characterized the early decades of the nineteenth century as a historical moment in which the moral state of the British nation was in imminent jeopardy. Writing at the close of the Romantic period, Carlyle's portrait of contemporary society was founded on the idea that, far from effecting improvement, development was threatening Britain's moral character.

In the essay Carlyle terms the contemporary epoch 'the Mechanical Age', listing the ways in which this new age of factories and steam ships has brought with it change and material advancement:

What wonderful accessions have thus been made, and are still making, to the physical power of mankind; how much better fed, clothed, lodged and, in all outward respects, accommodated men now are, or might be, by a given quantity of labour, is a grateful reflection which forces itself on every one.¹

However, this apparent progress is tempered and qualified in Carlyle's account, not just because it appears to be 'strangely altering the old relations'² between the wealthy and the poor but because, Carlyle argues, it has fundamentally changed the nature of human experience:

Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.³

Writing in the very middle years of the period that Asa Briggs famously termed the 'Age of Improvement', in a city whose eighteenth-century Enlightenment had produced the staid histories of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, Carlyle had been shaped by a context in which ideas of development and improvement were omnipresent.⁴ However, like many of his contemporaries, Carlyle argued that the pursuit of material or 'mechanical' improvement in Britain had led to the neglect of other forms of human advancement. In Carlyle's opinion the greatest achievements of human civilization had not been the product of 'institutions and establishments and well-arranged systems of mechanism' like those which increasingly characterized modern British life.⁵ Instead, Carlyle points to the importance of the 'Dynamic' in the events which have shaped national history: a term he uses to indicate the 'primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character'.⁶ Iconic events in British history like the Reformation, the Crusades and the Glorious Revolution were all motivated by the invisible and spiritual rather than the desire for material advancement in Carlyle's account. Britain in 1829 may be the most economically advanced nation on earth, he contends, but this development has been achieved through a neglect of the spiritual which has actually retarded national advancement:

By our skill in Mechanism, it has come to pass, that in the management of external things we excel all other ages; while in whatever respects the pure moral nature, in true dignity of soul and character, we are perhaps inferior to most civilised ages.⁷

Carlyle's essay suggests that the 'Age of Improvement' has left spiritual aspects of British life to degenerate. The form of systematic, material improvement which has underwritten the previous decades of change has excluded the individual and the metaphysical. In setting up this dichotomy Carlyle is drawing from a pre-existing wellspring of Scottish conservative thought which sought to expose an apparently growing moral and spiritual void at the heart of modern British life. Although it has popularly been characterized as 'the first great

protest against attitudes that were to provide dogma for Victorian materialism, anticipating works like Ruskin's *Unto This Last* and Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*,⁸ Carlyle's critique of the 'mechanical age' was published within Edinburgh's premier Whig publication and thereby positioned within the city's politically informed periodical rivalries. 'Signs of the Times', despite its location of publication, is critical of the Whig perspective on historical development which had informed the journal since its foundation in 1802. Gertrude Himmelfarb comments in her introduction to the essay that it: 'appeared in the last issue of the *Edinburgh Review* edited by Francis Jeffrey ... In a mischievous mood, perhaps prompted by his resignation, Jeffrey invited Carlyle's critique of the progressive, utilitarian philosophy that the journal normally espoused'.⁹ The *Edinburgh Review* advocated an approach to historical development which insisted on the inevitability of progress and improvement, as Leslie Mitchell summarizes: 'the direction of human affairs was determinedly upward. Scots professors had told the Whigs that this was so, and the *Edinburgh* rehearsed the creed at regular intervals'.¹⁰

However, this approach to history had influential detractors in the form of the numerous authors who wrote for the Tory periodical *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The two magazines and other satellite partisan publications were, throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, engaged in a rivalry whose battleground was often the nature of history itself. *Blackwood's* was the site of what Ian Duncan terms 'the new Tory cultural nationalism'.¹¹ Its icons were tradition, British patriotism, folk culture and established religion all of which contributed to 'the magazine's general opposition to the political economic stance'.¹² Thus Carlyle's critique of a 'mechanical' society, when placed within the context of the Edinburgh periodicals, joins those of a body of Scottish writers who, rather than arguing that economic development would automatically effect the progressive 'civilization' of the British population, emphasized the need for an alternative definition of improvement.

This chapter examines a specifically Scottish conservative response to narratives of improvement, during the years leading up to the publication of 'Signs of the Times', looking at texts which employed icons of Scottish cultural nationalism to reassert the importance of the traditional and the moral in maintaining and improving British society. It argues that, in

the case of two such texts, Elizabeth Hamilton's novel *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808) and John Wilson's short story collection *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life* (1822), the authors employ the deaths of Scottish rural dwellers to place ideas of economic and spiritual improvement in direct confrontation.

There are two publishing traditions to be considered when thinking about the role of ideas of improvement in Hamilton and Wilson's texts. First the recently reinvigorated evangelical tract tradition, which during the early nineteenth century represented rural worker protagonists as exemplars for their readership; and additionally, a rash of contemporary novels and magazine stories whose portrayals of Scotland's rural population symbolized national debates and characteristics. Although both traditions use the cottager to engage with ideas of improvement, their intended readership and function are quite different. Hamilton and Wilson both reference the death narratives commonly presented in evangelical religious tracts, drawing upon a tradition of conservative didacticism within these texts which increasingly used the deathbed scene to affirm religious and social conformity. However, in removing moralized death bed scenes from religious publishing and placing them within the burgeoning genre of the 'Scotch novel' or tale, Hamilton and Wilson use the conventional final moments of the tract tradition to reflect on the relationship between morality and its economic context. In doing so, they offer another definition of 'improvement' where the trials of traditional life are not cast as indicative of the backwardness of unimproved Scottish rural life, but rather serve to effect a process of moral improvement for the narratives' peasant protagonists.

The Good Death, the Evangelical Tract Tradition and Working Class Moral Improvement

The renewed popularity of evangelical religion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had a pervasive impact on the way in which death was imagined and portrayed in British writing. The British evangelical revival led to what Pat Jalland has described as the 'revitalisation' of 'the Christian ideal of the "good death"'.¹³ Drawing on the conventions of foundational seventeenth-century Protestant texts, such as Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying*¹⁴ (1651) (which went through 'at least eight editions ... in London in the first half of the nineteenth century'), collections of exemplary or terrible deaths such as Timothy East's *Death Bed Scenes; or the Christian's Companion on Entering the Dark Valley*¹⁵

(1825) and John Warton's *Death-Bed Scenes and Pastoral Conversations*¹⁶ (1830) were increasingly circulating across Britain, seeking to prepare and instruct readers in how to die a Godly death.¹⁷ The London-based Religious Tract Society and numerous similar evangelical organizations also published inexpensive pamphlets containing simple and highly conventional accounts of 'good' deaths, which were designed to act as "silent messengers" among the working classes'.¹⁸ Jalland has summarized the standard characteristics of such publications:

The published evangelical deathbed accounts in tracts, journals and biographies were intended ... primarily for popular moral instruction, with the undesirable features edited out ... Death ideally should take place at home, with the dying person making explicit farewells to each family member. There should be time, and physical and mental capacity for the completion of temporal and spiritual business ... The dying person should be conscious and lucid until the end, resigned to God's will, able to beg forgiveness for past sins and to prove his or her worthiness for salvation. Pain and suffering should be borne with fortitude and even welcomed as a final test of fitness for Heaven and willingness to pay for past sins.¹⁹

She also highlights the way in which emotion is expressed by the families of the dying, stating that 'Evangelism encouraged the expression of love, sorrow, and faith at the nineteenth-century deathbed'.²⁰ There was a conventional series of features which the writer of a tract relied on when representing a Godly death – a set recipe for a good evangelical death. Although they do not have all of the features which Jalland describes, most tracts resemble each other through their employment of the majority of these techniques.

The Cottager's Wife, a tract which was published independently in Glasgow in 1817, exemplifies some of the patterns we see in these texts in a specifically Scottish context. In the tract, a new chaplain of a rural parish visits the bedside of a young and pious woman he has heard is 'in decline' and would like his religious counsel.²¹ Entering her home he is 'struck with the remarkable cleanliness and neatness of every part of it' and on conversing with her is further impressed by her acceptance of death and faith in God.²² Visiting her

several times he becomes convinced of her Godliness and learns the story of the exemplary death of her even more pious sister, whom the cottager's wife describes as having died of the same disease 'so peacefully, so happily, that nobody could doubt of her having gone to Heaven'.²³ The cleric's analysis of the wife's state of Grace is confirmed in her last moments when it is made apparent that the dutiful and pious wife has experienced a good death:

After I left her, she revived only for a few minutes, during which she faintly and delightfully repeated her faith and hope of salvation; and soon afterwards slept peacefully in the Lord; leaving on the minds of those who witnessed her departure, a lively impression of her extraordinary piety, and heavenly happiness.²⁴

The conventional features of evangelical texts like this one would have been broadly recognisable to the literate public throughout Britain due to a distribution strategy which aimed to achieve the widest circulation possible. The Religious Tract Society was able to propagate its message widely because it took a broadly evangelical position rather than being specifically allied to any one denomination, allowing it to address Britain's diverse evangelical readership. Aileen Fyfe highlights that following its foundation in 1799,

Within its first year, the Tract Society's supporters already included lay and clerical members of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland and the Secession Church, the Baptist, Methodist and Independent churches, and the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. By 1807, there were also Lutherans and members of the Society of Friends.²⁵

This meant that although different evangelical sects disagreed on many points of theology (in fact these disagreements would lead to multiple religious schisms within Scottish Presbyterianism alone during the nineteenth century) they shared a common library of core popular publications, and therefore a shared vocabulary of literary imagery in relation to death.

The tracts were also physically available on a large scale, and their content was accessible to readers of varying educational levels. Fyfe states that they were 'distributed and sold by

booksellers, hawkers, and home and foreign missionaries, as well as the volunteers in the auxiliary associations', guaranteeing their availability to a wide range of readers.²⁶ Simple language and narrative content along with cheap printing methods allowed the publications to reach the greatest possible section of the newly expanded reading public. This tactic was central in the attempts of the Tract Society and evangelical publishers at large to harness the potential of an emergent working-class readership.

William St Clair has stated that from the late eighteenth century a 'rapid expansion in reading occurred across all strata of society, whether categorised by income, by occupation, by educational attainment, by geographical location, by age, or by gender' in Britain.²⁷ As literary education and access to printed books expanded, members of new demographics became regular readers. The birth of a mass reading public at a time when social structures were under significant scrutiny led to a widespread concern amongst traditional reading groups about what almost universal access to print culture might mean for British society. As St Clair comments, a widened reading public held the potential to improve or subvert the existing political system:

Could reading help to bind the nation into a more secure cultural and political consensus, and so enable it to escape the violent revolutions which had engulfed France and other countries? Or, as others feared, would the spread of new ideas carried by print destabilise the precarious constructions of belief on which existing political, economic, social and gender relationships were founded?²⁸

Many evangelical religious publications were intended to answer these questions with a practical solution. Attempting to counter the 'immoral' messages propagated by novels, cheap penny fiction and the writings of political thinkers like Thomas Paine, tract societies and evangelical writers produced alternative 'improving' reading material for the working classes.

In particular, Hannah More's influential *Cheap Repository Tract*²⁹ (1795-8) series set an important precedent for the conservative didacticism which Hamilton and Wilson were subsequently to employ to different ends in their literary fiction. Producing simple, cheaply

printed stories in conjunction with other members of the Clapham sect, 'More's general project, like that of other evangelical and utilitarian literary reformers, was to provide wholesome reading in place of the textual poisons she saw everywhere in her culture'.³⁰ Her series of tracts was widely read and circulated, selling in their millions, and described the lives and deaths of pious or sinful rural workers. The stories within the collection were both evangelical and politically conservative, instructing their intended working class audience in piety and self-reliance; Simon J. White has described them as 'conduct books for labouring people on the subject of self-sufficiency'.³¹ However, this self-sufficiency is always differentiated from forms of independent thought which could be seen as politically radical. Characters are independent in the sense that they do not rely on the poor law for relief, but generally uninterested in significant social advancement. More advocates hard work, religious piety and familial affection as the means of achieving a respectable and 'good' death. To die peacefully in the arms of God is the reward for a life of religious and social conformity; an agonizing and unrepentant death (like that of Black Giles in 'Black Giles the Poacher'³²) is a punishment for breaking the rules of More's Godly community. Submission to God coincides with submission to secular authority. In More's tracts personal moral improvement is an antidote to wider socio-economic change, reinforcing the existing status quo.

Improving the MacClartys: Elizabeth Hamilton's *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*

Published in 1808, *Glenburnie* has been described by Pam Perkins as 'a Scottish version of Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts*', and shares a rural setting and didactic function with these texts.³³ However, where the *Cheap Repository Tracts* are aimed at an almost exclusively working-class readership, the intended readership for *Glenburnie* is more difficult to identify. In Hamilton's novel, a dysfunctional cottager family, the aptly named MacClartys, undergo domestic reform as their indomitable relation, ex-servant Mrs Mason, puts their filthy cottage to rights. Although this tale could clearly function as an instructional text for the working classes – and Hamilton states this avowed aim in her epistle to Hector Macneill³⁴ – the novel's length and the author's use of a more sophisticated structure and language suggest that it was not exclusively written for this market.³⁵ On first publication the novel was read by a wide range of readers – Walter Scott includes a reference to it in *Waverley*³⁶, assuming that it will be a text with which his own broad readership will be

familiar. Hamilton's mixed audience therefore included sections of readers who did not identify directly with the cottager. The book takes on a different function for such readers; rather than improving them by offering a course of conduct appropriate for emulation, it opens up a space for debate about the improvement of society. The novel's primary purpose in such a context is not didactic but discursive. These readers are not supposed to identify themselves as MacClartys but as Mrs Mason figures.

Comprising two chapters, the death of the cottager, Mr MacClarty, forms a central episode in Hamilton's novel. Mr MacClarty's response to his rapid dissolution follows many of the patterns prevalent in contemporary evangelical tracts. His response to the news that his child and wife are also dangerously ill is one of resignation and religious faith: 'he made no answer, than that they were in the hands of a merciful God, and his life and death be submitted to his will'.³⁷ Even in his final moments he manages to communicate his state of Grace to those who witness his death: 'he was now speechless, but his hands were lifted up in the attitude of prayer'.³⁸ Hamilton utilizes the conventions of the 'good death' to articulate her own political perspective on the life and death of the rural cottager.

Given Hamilton's well-documented anti-Jacobin stance one might expect that her portrayal of the MacClarty family would represent the moral superiority of traditional society. However, rather than representing a countryside peopled by virtuous cottagers, Hamilton populates her rural landscape with peasants in desperate need of domestic reform and improvement. The MacClartys, with their small but substantial cottage and handful of cows perfectly fit into the cottager economic group, but they are cottagers gone wrong. Despite their semi-independent status and access to common pasture they are ignorant of the skills required to manage their domestic environment and largely unwilling to be educated. It falls to their relation Mrs Mason to equip the feckless cottager family with the values she has learned during her time as a servant and to thus attempt to fit the MacClarty family for the modern, rapidly improving rural world.

Hamilton's text, although often affectionate in its perspective on cottager culture, is highly critical of those who indiscriminately follow custom. The constant refrain which the cottagers use to explain their desire not to improve things is that they 'cou'd no be fashed',

and this desire to keep things as they are even when it is inconvenient becomes the obstacle against which Mrs Mason must battle.³⁹ The criticism of conserving practices because that is how they have always been is central to Hamilton's programme for small-scale, individual-focused reform. The crusading Mrs Mason advocates personal change for the MacClartys, believing that industry and discipline can modestly improve their standard of living without radically altering their social position. Mrs Mason's recipe for a good cottage life combines piety with personal industry. The rewards associated with this good life, within the text, are not simply a good death but also a real improvement in material living standards, which can be experienced in the here and now. Although characters are not encouraged to transcend their own class identity, and where a character is perceived to 'over-reach' they are rapidly chastened, reform of the individual and their own immediate domestic environment can elevate the working-class through the inculcation of modernizing, middle-class values. Thus the novel is, in its own small way, committed to ideas of improvement as a solution to political and social instability; as Claire Grogan suggests, Hamilton promotes: 'the modernisation of her [Hamilton's] own part of Britain in order to eliminate social, cultural and economic disparities that threaten the unity of state and empire'.⁴⁰

However, despite being the root cause of MacClarty's death, the cottager community and its culture is not presented as hopeless or inherently backward. Once the 'clart' of custom and superstition is washed away, the cottager's lifestyle is presented as one with an inherent value worthy of preservation. Mr MacClarty's death and funeral are favourably compared with the deaths and funerals of the aristocracy several times. In a passage with strong overtones of Robert Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', Hamilton describes how, when questioned by the minister, the dying man:

strongly evinced the faith and hope of a Christian – that faith and that hope, which transforms the death-bed of the cottager into a scene of glory, on which kings and conquerors might look with envy, and in comparison of which, all the grandeur of the world is contemptible.⁴¹

Watching from the cottage as the funerary procession passes (women traditionally could not attend the graveside at a Scottish funeral), Mrs Mason again reflects on the contrast

between the rituals she is watching and those of the MacClartys' social superiors, comparing the empty carriages sent by noble families to pay respect at her aristocratic Master's funeral to the group of genuinely grieving neighbours and friends who gather to mark Mr MacClarty's death together:

Casting her eyes upon the rustic train who followed, she could not help contrasting the outward circumstances of this solemnity, with those that had attended the last event of a similar nature in which she had been interested. She had seen her noble master conducted to the grave in all the splendour befitting his station ... 'Where now,' thought she 'are the distinctions of rank? Where those barriers, which in this world separate man from man? Even here sorrow only embalms the memory of the righteous ... Why then should those of lowly station envy the trappings of vanity, that are but the boast of the moment, when, by piety and virtue, they may attain a distinction so much more lasting and glorious? To the humble and the lowly are the gates of Paradise thrown open'.⁴²

This extended reflection not only references the idea of death as a leveller, but also sets out an advantage of the life of a peasant over those of their social superiors – the possibility of 'true' community. The 'good death' is not merely defined in Hamilton's text as one where the dying party's piety is confirmed through marks of Godliness, but also as one where their position within their community is valorized. The respect and grief of Mr MacClarty's friends and neighbours are as much a mark of his 'goodness' as his clasped hands and the words of piety he utters on his deathbed. This sense of social kinship is at odds with the isolation of the aristocratic characters in the text who are invariably members of broken families prone to disagreement and estrangement. The death of Mr MacClarty, when the family ignore Mrs Mason's modern medical knowledge in favour of a hot airless room, whisky, and rusty lancet, reveals the damage which custom and superstition can effect. However, his idealized death bed scene and his funeral reveal the superior social kinship and community, and the enduring moral rectitude possible within the poor rural village. Mrs Mason, in her campaign for improvement in the cottager community and her attempts to help heal the rift between father and daughter in the aristocratic Stewart family, seems to seek a middle way between the empty carriages of the aristocracy and the customary clart of the farm toun. She takes

on the role of the clergyman narrator in *The Cottager's Wife*, but brings secular middle-class values instead of religious counsel to the cottage.

Where Hannah More's tales have a straightforwardly didactic function, employing a highly conservative definition of personal morality to forestall social change, Hamilton's approach to ideas of improvement is more nuanced. Her address to both the tract-reading working-class and the traditional novel readers of the middle-classes gives the novel a dual register. It can both be interpreted as a text intended to offer practical instruction, and as a more theoretical and detached perspective on social change, aimed at an educated audience unfamiliar with the realities of cottage life. In this second function it takes part in an ongoing engagement with Scottish rural life within early nineteenth-century discourse which cast the cotter as a symbol of broader cultural loss.

'A Certain Type of Scottishness': Cotters in Nineteenth-Century Scottish Writing

The humble cottage dweller was not just a stock figure in religious publications but also a commonly employed political symbol within Romantic-era British letters. Simon J. White asserts that, 'the cottager who relied on his common rights or customary practices for a semi-independent living would become a major figure in both polemical and literary writing about rural communities from the 1790s through to the beginning of the 1830s'.⁴³ What the cottager (or cotter) stood for depended on the political sentiments of the writer. Generally, however, whether a writer wished to return to paternalistic systems of land management, or desired a new order, the peasant and his cottage were emblems of rural change and the possibility of cultural loss.⁴⁴ In conservative texts in particular the virtuous cottager represented the benefits of a social system which seemed to be being pushed to the verge of annihilation by unchecked free-market economics and processes of improvement. The cottager could thus function as a political symbol, either as emblematic of the possibilities of an alternative new social order, in which all would have a stake in the future of the land, or of a traditional moral order founded on paternal relations between landowners and labourers.

This role was even more pronounced within Scottish letters where the 'cotter' figure held particular national significance. In 1786, Robert Burns had published 'The Cotter's Saturday

Night' in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.⁴⁵ With its focus on a scene of domestic piety in the home of a Scottish peasant, 'The Cotter' quickly became an icon of Scottish conservatism, despite the relative political ambiguity of its content. Ignoring the more problematic stanzas at the close of the poem, conservative reviewers and biographers such as Robert Heron and John Wilson adopted the poem as a symbol of an endangered traditional Scotland.⁴⁶ Such was the power of this iconography that Andrew Nash has argued that during the nineteenth century Scotland became 'identified' as 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'.⁴⁷ The contented and self-sufficient rural Scot was a central character in Walter Scott's *Waverley Novels* and the rash of 'Scotch Novels' published in their wake. By the end of the century, life in the Scottish cottage was the central motif of the popular 'Kailyard' novels of J. M. Barrie, Ian Maclaren and S. R. Crockett. The inhabitants of Hamilton's Glenburnie, and other fictional locations like it, became 'emblematic of a certain type of Scottishness' for nineteenth-century readers.⁴⁸

This interest in cottage life was a response to the particularly rapid change taking place within Scottish rural society. The pace of development within the Scottish countryside during the later eighteenth century outstripped that of its neighbours in England and Wales. However, what T. M. Devine terms 'the striking success of the agricultural revolution in Scotland' incurred casualties.⁴⁹ Devine states that 'perhaps the most visible effect of Improvement was the removal of the cottars'.⁵⁰ Cotters had formed the 'majority of the rural population' in the Lowlands during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁵¹ They subsisted by cultivating a small number of acres of agricultural land which they leased from the owner of a larger farm and often acted as additional labourers on this farm for an agreed number of days a year. However, by the early years of the nineteenth century, this entire way of life had virtually disappeared from the Lowlands, with agricultural labour increasingly carried out by landless farm servants and labourers who worked all year for a wage. This change in the way farmers preferred to organize their labour force suited a new, modernized system of agriculture which was increasingly common across Scotland during the eighteenth century. Many previously rural workers relocated to Scotland's growing cities and industrial towns, becoming members of an emerging urban working class. The cotter was by the dawn of the nineteenth century one of Scotland's most prominent

symbols of economic and social change as an important rural social class morphed into a new, and perhaps more threatening, urban one.

It is therefore necessary to interpret representations of cotters in early nineteenth-century Scottish writing, particularly those featured in novels and elite periodicals, not as instructive texts aimed directly at this dwindling social group, but as texts which take part in a theoretical discussion of the ethics of economic development. The 'cotter' texts of this period often sought not to improve the British working classes by modelling exemplary behaviour and diverting their attention from 'textual poisons', but to engage with the politically fraught issue of national development using the figure of the Scottish peasant as a cipher. Scott and the authors of the 'Scotch Novels' were writing for an, admittedly broad, but largely middle-class audience whose engagement with peasant characters was not direct and personal but distanced and hypothetical. The 'Cottager's Wife' of the evangelical tract and the 'Cotter's' wife of contemporary novels and poetry were intended to speak to radically different audiences even if they appear on first reading to be remarkably similar. The focus had shifted from personal improvement to the impact and ideology of wider economic improvement even if the narrative and imagery remained the same.

'Joyful even in Resignation': Death in the Cottage in John Wilson's *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life*

The 'certain type of Scottishness' encountered in *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* is one which is again invoked in John Wilson's short story collection *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life* (1822), where Wilson depicts a domestic, rural Scotland of small communities, kinship and warm hearths. Hamilton's attempt to shift the readership of the moralized rural tale to an audience removed from the realities of agricultural production or labour was an innovation extended further by Wilson, with his decision to publish his own moralized stories within the pages of the Tory periodical *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The stories first appeared in the magazine between 1820 and 1821 during a period when *Blackwood's* was synonymous with a virulently Tory identity and an intense commercial and ideological rivalry with *The Edinburgh Review*. Wilson was chief contributor and de facto editor at *Blackwood's*; setting this agenda and often modelling it in his own submissions.⁵² *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life* thus engages with ideas of improvement from a perspective which

is self-consciously antagonistic to the Whig models of social and economic development espoused by *Blackwood's* rival publication.

Wilson's story collection has had something of a troubled critical afterlife. It was hugely popular during the first half of the nineteenth century. The editor of the 1846 edition emphasizes the text's commercial success in his preface: 'No volume ever enjoyed a more extensive popularity, and it will ever continue an especial favorite with all classes of readers, for its natural expositions of the human character and its passions, beauty of description and delicious pathos'.⁵³ However, the stories have slipped out of favour with modern readers and critics. Douglas S. Mack described *Lights and Shadows* variously as 'a collection of short stories in which the characters tend to shed tears copiously' and 'a somewhat monotonous and unconvincing picture of humanity'.⁵⁴ Part of the problem with *Lights and Shadows* for a reader today is almost certainly the sheer number of sentimental death-bed scenes Wilson has managed to include in the collection. There is an unusually high incidence of death in the twenty-four stories which make up *Lights and Shadows* – fourteen of the tales directly describe deaths whilst another three mention deaths which have already happened and a further three stories contain near death experiences.

Wilson's reliance on deathbed scenes in *Lights and Shadows* allows him, like Hamilton, to draw upon a tradition of conservative religious didacticism in contemporary literature and print culture. The use of the conventions associated with religious tracts in Wilson's rural fiction has been commented upon both by his contemporaries and modern critics. Contemporary commentators noted the relationship between Wilson's prose fiction and religious educational writing. *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany's* 1823 review of another of his novels, *The Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*⁵⁵, compares Wilson's text to the most famous tract of the era⁵⁶, asserting that 'its greatest drawback is a certain methodistical air, which occasionally suggests to us the ideas of an overgrown tract – Leigh Richmond and the Dairyman's Daughter'.⁵⁷ Ian Duncan, more recently, touches on this relationship in *Scott's Shadow* when he comments that, in *Lights and Shadows*, Wilson seeks to 'neutralise evangelical piety in the medium of conservative pathos'.⁵⁸ However Wilson's tract-esque deathbed scenes have not been subjected to further scrutiny, nor have they

been considered in relation to contemporary Scottish writers, like Hamilton, who also co-opted the evangelical 'good death' to secular ends.

Wilson's adoption and adaptation of the conventions of the tract tradition can be illustrated by looking at one of his stories, which mirrors the content of *The Cottager's Wife*. The story 'Consumption', from *Lights and Shadows*, contains a similar narrative of sickness, religious faith and beautiful premature death: in the course of the tale a widow and three daughters, who inhabit a flower-laden cottage, are killed one by one by tuberculosis. The story celebrates their resignation and faith in God as they anticipate their fate; after the death of their mother the orphans are described patiently waiting to join her – 'they sat in their beauty within the shadow of death'.⁵⁹ Like the pious young woman in *The Cottager's Wife*, the sisters do not forget their domestic and charitable duties in the face of their illness: tending a flower garden and offering charity to the children and the elderly of the village. The sisters are also visited by their pastor, and the narrator comments that, 'when the old minister visited them, he found them always cheerful and composed – during his stay they were joyful even in resignation'.⁶⁰ This state of apparently joyful expectation is confirmed when each of the three experiences a good and aesthetically attractive death. The author comments of the youngest, Caroline, that 'with her the disease assumed its most beautiful show' and that,

No one was with her when she died, for she had risen earlier than her sisters, and was found by them, when they came down to the parlour, leaning back with a smiling face, on the sofa, with a few lilies in her hand, and never more to have her head lifted up in life.⁶¹

Similarly Emma, the second daughter, reaps the benefits of a God-fearing life – 'on her dead face there sat a smile, just as pleasant and serene as that which had lighted the countenance of Caroline, when she fell asleep for ever with the lilies in her hand'.⁶² Finally the eldest, Louisa, expires in the arms of her betrothed, gazing at the graves of her family.⁶³

Just as in *The Cottager's Wife*, the signs of Grace which the suffering women evince during their decline are confirmed by deaths which are used by witnesses as evidence of Godliness.

In a pattern which the two texts share, a minister goes into a humble home to comfort and guide its inhabitant towards a good death, whilst simultaneously acting as an observer – giving the reader access to this private domestic scene and the moral message it contains. The conventions of this idealized depiction of Godly death are repeated in the majority of Wilson’s death scenes. However, there are some obvious differences between the two texts, which are perhaps indicative of the shift in intended audience between the tract and the *Blackwood’s* story. ‘Consumption’ is far more interested in the aesthetics of death than contemporary religious tracts. The ‘delightful’ness hinted at in *The Cottager’s Wife* is explored in detail in ‘Consumption’, where we spend more time looking at the bodies of the dead women. Aesthetics seem to have caught up with instruction in terms of importance. The class status of the protagonist has also changed; although they live in a cottage the widow and her daughters are gentlewomen living in reduced circumstances not cottagers. This means that their deaths do not operate as effectively as exemplars for a rural working-class audience.

Resignation is a prominent theme across Wilson’s collection of stories. In ‘Moss-Side’, Wilson links the Christian resignation of the good death with a resignation to economic hardship that he sees as a defining feature of the good peasant. ‘Moss-side’ tells the story of the poor but morally upstanding Ainslie family as they nurse their youngest child through an almost fatal fever. Wilson describes the family as members of ‘the blameless poor’.⁶⁴ He argues that their economic status is not a result of the family’s abilities or righteousness – although they work hard, live moral lives and are frugal, the family are economically deprived – but neither does he imply that the family are being oppressed by a man-made economic system; rather he suggests that theirs is a position which has been given to them by Providence:

Gilbert Ainslie was a slave, but it was for them he loved with a sober and deep affection. The thralldom under which he lived God had imposed, and it only served to give his character a shade of gravity, but not austere; to make his smiles fewer, but heartfelt; to calm his soul at grace before and after meals; and to kindle it in morning and evening prayer.⁶⁵

Wilson interprets poverty as the necessary condition of a certain stratum of society, a result of Providential will rather than personal moral failings. In fact, Gilbert Ainslie's low social status and numerous struggles galvanize his superior morality and piety. The traditional social structure of rural Scotland with its peasantry, ministers and Lairds is presented by Wilson as God-given and thus within *Lights and Shadows* any attempt to transcend these structures and engender greater social mobility leads to ruin. The stories champion complete resignation to personal economic hardship, interpreting poverty as a circumstance as inescapable as death.

The Ainslies are not strangers to the tragedy of childhood mortality – 'of ten children that had been born to them, they had lost three'⁶⁶ – but in 'Moss-side' their resignation to the deaths of these children gives them dignity and spiritual elevation, even as their material circumstances remain unchanged:

Utter poverty often kills the affections; but a deep, constant and common feeling of this world's hardships, and an equal participation in all those struggles by which they may be softened, unite husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, in thoughtful and subdued tenderness, making them happy indeed, while the circle round the fire is unbroken, and yet preparing them every day to bear the separation, when some one or other is taken slowly or suddenly away ... there is a wise moderation both in the joy and the grief of the intelligent poor, which keeps lasting trouble away from their earthly lot, and prepares them silently and unconsciously for Heaven.⁶⁷

To be poor in Wilson's text is not a punishment but simply God's will. To bear this will with resignation and tolerance is to be a 'good' peasant, just as bearing the suffering which will lead to one's eventual demise represents a route to a 'good' death in an evangelical death tract. The relation between the two is made explicit at the close of the tale, when the miraculous recovery of the child is mirrored in the miraculous rescue of the family's finances by a bequest from the Will of a distant relative.⁶⁸ In both cases the family have submitted themselves to what they perceive to be the will of God and it is only after this complete submission that they are providentially saved.

The burial which follows an exemplary death also functions to highlight the 'goodness' of the dead person and more importantly that of their living kin. Describing the moral rectitude of the Ainslie family, Wilson is careful to mention the way in which they marked the deaths of their three children:

As they had fed, clothed, and educated them respectably, so did they give them who died a respectable funeral. The living did not grudge to give up, for a while, some of their daily comforts, for the sake of the dead; and bought, with the little sums which their industry had saved, decent mournings, worn on Sabbath, and then carefully laid by.⁶⁹

The burials of the Ainslies' children are not morally exemplary *despite* their poverty but *because* of it. The family use their limited resources not to afford materially better lives but to ensure that their dead can assume a 'respectable' position within the burial ground which accords with their respectable position within the community. Mrs Ainslie makes this relationship explicit when she discusses the problems the family may have in affording a decent burial for their critically ill daughter – 'dear me, it is cruel to be put to it thus, when our bairn is dying, and when, if so it be the Lord's will, she should have a decent burial, poor innocent, like them that went before her'.⁷⁰ Saved money is not intended for material advancement but rather to maintain personal status beyond death and into the grave. A 'good death' is the prize of a life of virtuous rural poverty and it is therefore important to be able to be buried in the correct 'place'.

The representation of death in 'Moss-side' typifies Wilson's alignment of religious and social virtue in his stories. The cotters guarantee their own secular and spiritual immortality by accepting the will of God in the form of physical suffering and destitution. This approach both draws upon and rearranges the central message of the evangelical tracts. It suggests not only that humility and forbearance are the keys to the religious afterlife, but that social and political agitation are antithetical to religious virtue. This emphasis on improvement through forbearance might seem to resemble the reactionary employment of religious piety typified in More's tracts, however Wilson's stories are neither addressed to, nor narrated

by, the inhabitants of cottages. The concept of resignation in the *Lights and Shadows* stories takes on a far wider application when directed at *Blackwood's* urban, educated audience.

The Ruined Cottage

The story 'Consumption' opens with an image of the ruins of the beautiful abandoned cottage. As well as offering a tasteful metaphor for the bodies of the beautiful dead sisters, the cottage indicates the place of this story within the past. No-one has moved into the cottage following the deaths of the women; instead it is a monument to them, abandoned but still bedecked by 'the undecaying splendour' of moss roses and alive with bees and birds.⁷¹ The Scottish countryside as imagined in the image of the cottage is one abandoned to nature and the past. The cottage is not part of a real economic space but a pastoral symbol of an idealized lost world. This image is indicative of the overall approach to rural space in Wilson's text. The story of the consumptive sisters, like the other narratives of rural piety and idealized death in Wilson's collection, is designed not to elicit action but pathos; it is a comforting eulogy rather than a call to arms.

Where Hamilton follows her protagonist Mrs Mason's quest for change and reform, Wilson's narrator is the son of a minister who has returned to his father's parish on a visit. His only role is to record what he sees and feels in picturesque vignettes. In 1808 had Hamilton sought ways to resuscitate Scottish cottar life; as we enter the 1820s Wilson is sending his narrator to record its funeral and devise a fittingly moving obituary. Although Wilson's stories are moral tales with religious and social messages, they are primarily nostalgic historical fictions which attempt to address a modern readership with stories of a beautiful and virtuous way of life which is almost extinct and cannot be reinvigorated. Wilson's countryside is less an actual space than a realm of Tory pastoral fantasy.

This reading of Wilson's stories as mock-didactic tales with little actual intention to instruct, or to solve economic and social problems, is reinforced by the way in which resignation typically operates in the *Lights and Shadows* narratives. Wilson has little interest in either 'improving' his reader like the tract authors or in resuscitating traditional social structures through middle-class domestic economy as Hamilton's dedication suggests she would like to. Wilson's cottagers are instead emblems of an aesthetic and cultural Toryism. They are

perpetually dying because this is how Wilson sees Scotland's traditional rural communities. However, this state of perpetual decline does not drain Wilson's cotters of symbolic potency.

In deemphasizing the 'improving' tale's original instructional import Wilson reasserts the importance of the spiritual, the traditional, the emotional and the aesthetic in defiance of the models of value implicit in stadial historicism. The *Lights and Shadows* stories can be read as demonstrations of Carlyle's notion of the 'dynamic' defying 'mechanical' models of national development. There is no outcome or impact, instead a series of picturesque vignettes of deathbeds cast Scottish rural life, and to an extent Scottish national culture, as repositories of the aesthetic, the emotive and the archaic. Resigned to the death, or at least decline, of actual traditional life Wilson sets about constructing an idealized cultural artefact on which he can build a specifically Scottish brand of resistant Tory romanticism. The cotter, always in her or his final moments of life, forever resigned to that inevitable demise, maintains an emotive and aesthetic power for readers. Wilson's dying cotters are statues of martyrs for an evangelical, conservative and middle-class audience attempting to reconcile their promoted position in a modern society and their nostalgia for an imagined, disappearing world.

¹ T. Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in *Selected Writings*, ed. A. Shelston (London: Penguin, 1971), pp. 61-85, on p. 64.

² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴ A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* [1959] (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁵ Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸ A. Shelston, 'Notes', in T. Carlyle, *Selected Writings*, p. 59.

⁹ G. Himmelfarb (ed.), *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 31.

¹⁰ L. Mitchell, *The Whig World: 1760-1837* (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), p. 105.

¹¹ I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 28.

¹² A. Jarrells, 'Tales of the Colonies: *Blackwood's*, Provincialism and British Interests Abroad', in *Romanticism and Blackwood's Magazine: 'An Unprecedented Phenomenon'*, ed. R. Morrison and D. S. Roberts (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 267-78, on p. 267.

¹³ P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 3.

¹⁴ J. Taylor, *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (Boston: E.P. Dutton and Co. 1876).

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- ¹⁵ T. East, *Death Bed Scenes; or the Christian's Companion on Entering the Dark Valley* (London: Francis Westley, 1825).
- ¹⁶ J. Warton, *Death-Bed Scenes and Pastoral Conversations* (London: Clakin and Budd, 1832).
- ¹⁷ D. G. Faust, 'The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying' in *Civil War Soldier: A Historical Reader*, ed. M. Barton and L. M. Logue (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), pp. 485-512, on p. 504.
- ¹⁸ A. Fyfe, *Industrialised Conversion: The Religious Tract Society and Popular Science Publishing in Victorian Britain* (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2000), p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, p. 26.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ²¹ *The Cottager's Wife* (Glasgow: N. Douglas, 1814), p. 3.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ²⁵ Fyfe, *Industrialised Conversion*, p. 23.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ²⁷ W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 11.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ²⁹ H. More. *Tales for the Common People and Other Cheap Repository Tracts*, ed. C. MacDonald Shaw. (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2002).
- ³⁰ P. Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 5.
- ³¹ S. J. White, *Romanticism and the Rural Community* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 21.
- ³² In this tract, Giles, a notorious village poacher and sinner, is mortally wounded when a wall collapses whilst he is attempting to steal a cherry net. He is tended in his last moments by a good villager whom he has previously wronged and expires lamenting his own irreligiosity: 'The poor wretch could neither pray himself, nor attend to the Minister. He could only cry out, "Oh, Sir, what will become of me? I don't know how to repent. Oh my poor wicked children! Sir, I have bred them all up in fin and ignorance. Have mercy on them, Sir; let me not meet than in the place of torment to which I am going." He languished a few days, and died in great misery' p.16. More. *Black Giles the Poacher: Part II*. (London: J.Marshall) transcript at <http://ota.ox.ac.uk/text/5411.html> [accessed 22 January 2017]
- ³³ P. Perkins, 'Introduction', in E. Hamilton, *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, ed. P. Perkins (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010), pp. 1-44, on p. 5.
- ³⁴ Hamilton, *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, p. 47.
- ³⁵ As Claire Grogan comments, 'the work is far more ambitious both in its genre and its target audience'. See *Politics and Genre in the Works of Elizabeth Hamilton, 1756-1816* (Farnham and Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2012), p. 131.
- ³⁶ W. Scott, *Waverley*, ed. P.D. Garside, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 364.
- ³⁷ Hamilton, *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, p. 147.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- ⁴⁰ Grogan, *Politics and Genre*, p. 134.
- ⁴¹ Hamilton, *The Cottagers of Glenburnie*, p. 148.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ⁴³ White, *Romanticism and the Rural Community*, p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ White describes the variety of different representations of the cottager figure within British political writing during the 1790s in his introduction to *Romanticism and the Rural Community* (pp. 1-13).
- ⁴⁵ R. Burns, 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1786), pp. 124-37.
- ⁴⁶ This adoption of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' by Scotland's political Right is described in further detail in chapter 7 of N. Leask's *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 210-46.
- ⁴⁷ A. Nash, 'The Cotter's Kailyard' in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. R. Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 180-97, on p. 186.
- ⁴⁸ Perkins, 'Introduction', p. 33.
- ⁴⁹ T. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 157.
- ⁵⁰ T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2007* (London and New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 147.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 130.

⁵² Discussing *Blackwood's* corporate character, Robert Morrison identifies John Wilson as the source of 'its tone, its range, and its fearlessness'. His article makes a strong case for the centrality of Wilson in Scottish literary life during the early decades of the nineteenth-century. See R. Morrison, 'Blackwood's Berserker: John Wilson and the Language of Extremity', *Romanticism on the Net*, 20 (November, 2000), at <https://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2000/v/n20/005951ar.html>, [accessed 21 November 2016].

⁵³ 'R. H.', 'Introduction', in J. Wilson, *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life* (Boston: Saxton and Kelt, 1846), pp. 7-9, on p. 7.

⁵⁴ D. S. Mack, 'John Wilson, James Hogg, "Christopher North" and "The Ettrick Shepherd"', *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 12 (2001), pp. 5-24, on p. 11; D. S. Mack, 'Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life: James Hogg's *The Three Perils of Woman*', in H. W. Drescher and J. Schwend (eds), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Nineteenth Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 15-27, on p. 15.

⁵⁵ J. Wilson, *The Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1823).

⁵⁶ L. Richmond, *The Dairyman's Daughter: An Authentic Narrative*. (Kilmarnock: H. Crawford, 1817).

⁵⁷ 'Scottish Novels of the Second Class', *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* (July, 1823), p. 7. This was the retitled *Scots Magazine* produced by the publisher of the *Edinburgh Review*, Archibald Constable.

⁵⁸ Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, p. 172.

⁵⁹ J. Wilson, *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1839). p. 334.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 336.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 337.

⁶² Ibid., p. 339.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 341.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.30.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 335.