

Claire Mitchell and Zoe Venditozzi are fighting for pardons for all those executed for witchcraft in Scotland, the vast majority of whom were women, and for a memorial to those forgotten by history.

Rothsay historian and novelist **William WC Scott**, author of the 2007 book *The Bute Witches*, looks at the background.

The Bute Witches: Pardons?

BETWEEN THREE and four thousand innocent women were burnt as witches during the witch craze in Scotland which has never been explained.

Except once: in *The Bute Witches*.

In 1662 and 1673, six women of Bute (at least) were convicted of witchcraft and burnt at the Children's Corner. Why pardon them now? Because their relatives and friends would have bled in secret to the ends of their lives; even their relatives unborn, thereafter. The stigma of these murders was a blight upon every life affected and will still resonate in the lives of some today. The treatment of women was always harsh, men being so dominant then. It got worse because the minister of Rothsay Kirk came to believe he might lose his church. His fear made him use the Witchcraft Laws (of James VI) to persecute the witches, knowing that if he did so, he could save his congregation from going to a superior preacher.

The witchcraft trials were held after marks in the snow were seen showing that people were meeting in secret, disallowed like much else by the Kirk Session, who punished sinfulness in ways that were inhumane. Every neighbour was a spy for the Session.

What was the cause? A man known as Robert Stewart of Scarrell, son of the previous minister of Rothsay, a man viewed by all as 'well favoured' (p267 para 2 line 9 of *The Bute Witches*) probably a tall, powerful man; definitely, an ordained, graduate of Glasgow University. But RSS never became a minister. After acting as his father's assistant for a short time, he failed twice to be appointed, because he was too vigorous to contain himself, could not be trusted with widows or even married women, especially after dark.

Women, especially single women alone, were not valued and often lived in poverty, unsure

where the next meal would come from. What would they not do for a fine-looking, educated man with lands and money who had need of them, offering them anything they wanted if they would serve him? Their pre-trial confessions in the Inveraray Document tell us this.

Schoolmaster

Unable to get a job as a minister, he became the schoolmaster which, ironically, required him to write up the minutes of the Kirk Session. When he fell in love with his maid servant, who passed to him on his father's death, they formed a secret attachment. When the Session saw the bulge in Nance Throw, they began to put two and two together and RSS had to write it all down for the record, denying, of course, that he had any involvement. For months, the question of who had impregnated Nancy was the talk of the island. The expectation was that the culprit would be found and married by force to her. The idea that anyone of the gentry, already married, might be guilty, was thought impossible.

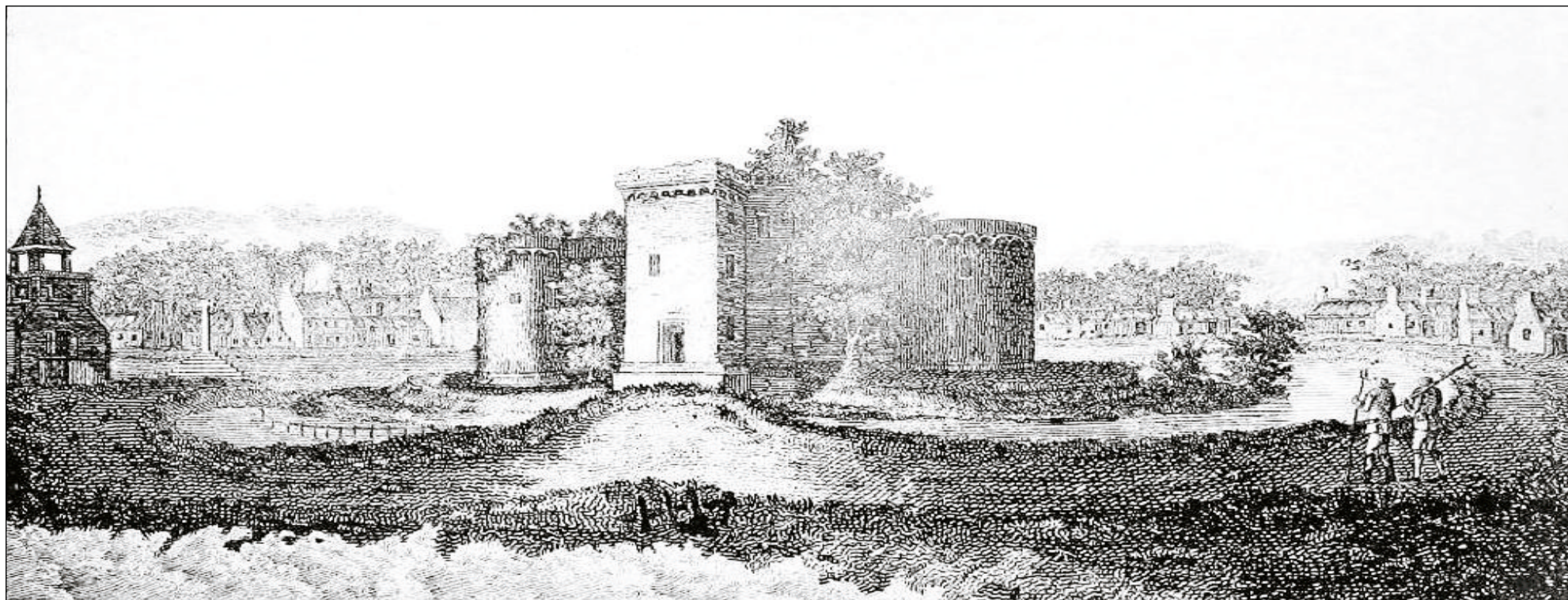
The Session hard men eventually broke down Nance and forced her to reveal that RSS was the culprit. Worse, he had tried to put the blame on other great men of the island. He was saved from death only by the confusion of the state of the country which had just lost the Ironsides: Cromwell's troops, who controlled the island until the death of the Protector and the accession of Charles II. Because he was of the gentry, RSS got off with a stiff fine and virtual excommunication from the Kirk. Barred from his usual society, he sought the company of the poorest people on the periphery: those who took an interest in medicinal plants and would help anyone, the only medical help available: the witch folk, a few of them men.

The 'evil eye'

Women of spirit would fight back against men and get the name of 'putting the evil eye' on them, when, by chance they suffered injury, illness or death, all too common then. The Session condemned and punished all sinners. Forcing them to stand in the joughs (a metal band round the neck) for hours, or dress in sack-cloth and do humiliating penance before the congregation and pay fines.

Forced to seek company amid the witch folk, RSS soon began to join them in their rituals, out of sight of the Session, in a hollow of the land (ever changing, in case of discovery) where a cauldron would cook some rabbit soup, whisky might be available and they could have a dance or sing songs to cheer themselves up. A fine change





from the eternal hellfire preached by the Session on going to Hell for their sins.

Faced with the question by his new friends, his only company: why did you do it? Make love to the maid and suffer excommunication? You must have known this would happen? RSS explained that he and she had fallen in love and there was no option: they were compelled by it. Could not resist it. He began to see that the Christianity of the Kirk Session was completely different from the compassion and forgiveness of the message of Jesus. Gradually, other people heard about these meetings and flocked to join them. The marks in the snow of people meeting in secret came to the attention of the New Minister. What was he to do? He was not as good a preacher as RSS. The congregation might leave him for this reprobate, this devil. Might even found a new church! Burning a few witches seemed a solution. The population would be cowed by this and return to obey the Kirk Session as before.

'Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: whomsoever doeth work thereon shall be put to death.' The Bible: Exodus Ch 35 v 1-2, King James version. This is the mentality of the time.

Starved

A 'woman that was suspected, according to their thoughts, to be a witch, was twenty eight days and nights with bread and water, being stript stark naked and laid upon a cold stone, with only a hair cloth over her. Others had hair shirts dipp'd in vinegar put on them to fetch off the skin.' Enemies of God, Larner, p75. Quoted in *The Bute Witches* p168.

It began decently with a few witches questioned in the Tolbooth in High Street. They were urged to tell the truth about each other's doings and their own. At first, there was little to say. The minister took notes with a few elders to assist. These formed the Inveraray Document (p252-277 of *The Bute Witches*) which contains the pre trial confessions of the witches (taken there after the trial). In January, snow lay on the ground for a month so the cells were freezing without heat and there was no proper arrangement for food, bedding, sanitation or hygiene. As time passed, those incarcerated were increasingly pressured to say something useful to the Session. Sleep deprivation was used to break down resistance:

questioning while they were paraded around the Tolbooth in the middle of the night, prodded to keep them moving: a procedure designed to make them compliant, to assent to the version the minister would write down. Gradually, the women were worn down by the Session, led by the minister. A few became psychotic because of the freezing cold, psychological pressure and starvation rations of the cells. They became eager to say what would please the Session men, promised relief if they 'told the truth' ie were believed. .

A few statements refer to shooting by the witches but this was a euphemism for casting the evil eye, for it is certain there were no weapons because of the Ironsides, who ruled with an iron hand, being in control. To be guilty of witchcraft was to agree to 'serve' the devil, be rebaptised by him usually receiving a favour or money. Sex was invariably involved. The devil of the island was well known: it was RSS, for making Nancy Throw pregnant at least that. It was easy to regard him as the actual devil of legend. The witches were encouraged to speak of him as 'the devil' by the minister who was the main note-taker.

Once, Margaret McLevine 'met the divell and a great company' from St Bride's Chapel (a disused ruinous Celtic church.) Who or what was the devil? The devil of the island was known: it was Robert Stewart of Scarrell. It suited the minister to regard RSS as The devil and record his doings as if he were. This, on January 28th 1662, p258.

Covenant

Jonet Morisone said she 'made a covenant with the devil' who promised to give her anything she desired. Asked his name, his answer was 'my name is Klareanough'. [everyone knew him]. At the time she met with the devil when he was going by with a great number of men that she asked him where they were going, she said he answered 'to seek prey.' p270-711 18th January 1662. In fact that was what the minister wrote down. Instead they were going off to 'pray'. That was what RSS would have been doing: leading them into a forgiving form of worship more like the ideas of Jesus than the harshness of the Session which rigidly condemned the least sin and executed those who broke the sabbath.

One of the witches escaped in 1662 from the Tolbooth and was believed to have returned having spent 12 years in Kilmarnock. Probably,

RSS helped her (his 'disciple') escape. and she lived close to Bute in hiding, aided by him, until recognised when she was burnt then in 1673 with another. There is no better candidate than RSS: one of the gentry, full of sexual vigour and need, well qualified with money and lands who had shown himself to be a devil with his maid servant and others, who could never be trusted to be the minister.

The Bute Witches is available on Amazon, reviewed in *The Herald* by Martin Tierney on 22.09.07 described as 'an astonishing true story.'

The Source Book of Scottish Witchcraft fails to use the Inveraray Document for, out of almost sixty people questioned, none are listed as convicted and burnt. Yet a careful reading tells us that several women satisfied the conditions for being a witch. Thus death was inevitable. At least six women of Bute were killed. Why are they listed in other documents as 'fate unknown'? Because the papers were destroyed soon after. But nothing was done to pardon the women who suffered.

Having gone to all that work and trouble to interrogate the witches, spin their stories to fit the narrative wanted by the minister and the Session, the document they wrote had to be read out at the trials. That they did not perform what they saw as their duty and burn the 'Enemies of God', according to the law, is inconceivable. The Bible was in every hand: it demanded death for sabbath breakers. The minister and elders thought it a duty to light the fires. Of course they did! The fate of the witches was inevitable. Why else were all the other papers destroyed?

Claire Mitchell QC leads a campaign to pardon the Witches of Scotland. which Nicola Sturgeon supports. We should all feel such sorrow that we ask for their pardon. Their descendants, still blighted by the cruelty, deserve it.

* Note: the statements by the witches show that at least six would be convicted. Given that about fifty nine people in Bute were questioned, it might have been more.

* Note: The Inveraray Document would be taken to Inveraray after the trial by the Earl (later beheaded, 1685). It was published in 1920 by the Scottish History Society, Second Series, Vol XX, Highland Papers III.