



ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA SAN ROCCO DI MONTPELLIER
CENTRO STUDI ROCCHIANO

JIM THOMSON

« ROCH, RENAISSANCE AND RAILWAYS. THE HISTORY OF SAINT ROCH/ROQUE IN SCOTLAND »



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« ROCCO, RINASCIMENTO E FERROVIE. LA STORIA DI SAN ROCCO IN SCOZIA »

Questo saggio assume un carattere veramente particolare, perchè ci introduce ad una realtà che francamente non ci saremmo aspettati. E' grazie a Jim Thomson, corrispondente in Scozia del nostro «Centro Studi», che siamo infatti in grado di scoprire un'ulteriore dimostrazione della straordinaria forza evocativa del nostro Santo, tuttora vivo addirittura nelle lontane terre britanniche.

Si tratta, ovviamente, di un culto limitato a poche zone, in particolare della Scozia, e riconducibile ad una ristretta cerchia di devoti. Del resto nel Regno Unito, su 60 milioni di abitanti, la religione dominante è quella anglicana; i cattolici sono circa 6 milioni, compreso, però il dato dell'Irlanda del Nord (circa 1 milione 800 mila). In Scozia la chiesa largamente maggioritaria è la presbiteriana, nata nel 1560, quando una componente scissionista dell'anglicanesimo decise di abbracciare il credo calvinista. I cattolici sono concentrati soprattutto nella zona di Glasgow, e sono i discendenti dei riconvertiti, in gran segreto, dopo la riforma protestante; una singolare testimonianza della situazione proviene addirittura dal mondo dello sport, in quanto le due squadre di calcio cittadine mantengono tuttora le loro antiche radici, cattoliche per il Celtic e protestanti per i Rangers.

Il saggio di Thomson ci spiega che l'arrivo in terra britannica del culto di san Rocco ebbe una origine francese, ed attecchì soprattutto in Scozia, in quanto particolarmente caro al re Giacomo IV (1473-1513). Fu lui a far edificare ben cinque cappelle, di cui una a Glasgow e una ad Edimburgo; ma di tutto ciò, purtroppo, rimane solo il ricordo. Le uniche tracce ancora visibili paradossalmente non sono scozzesi. Si tratta, per la precisione, delle rovine di una cappella a Merthyr Mawr, nelle vicinanze di Bridgend, nel Galles; la suggestiva Roche's Rock in Cornovaglia, un vero spettacolo della natura; ed ancora in Inghilterra, una cappella costruita sulla verde collina denominata *The Trundle*, presso Chichester, che ha finito con l'essere chiamata St. Roche's Hill.

E' il caso di soffermarci su quest'ultima testimonianza, in quanto sebbene essa, nel Settecento, sia stata distrutta dai protestanti, dall'anno 1997 ha assunto uno straordinario valore simbolico. Il 16 agosto, per festeggiare il settimo centenario della nascita del Santo (ovviamente sulla base della datazione tradizionale), venne organizzata, proprio nella vecchia cappella, una celebrazione ecumenica con messa all'aperto; per l'occasione venne utilizzata una Croce di San Rocco, che da allora ogni anno apre la processione, per essere poi conservata nella vicina chiesa di Singleton.

Il nostro san Rocco, insomma, si distingue sempre per essere portatore di un messaggio di pace e di tolleranza, ed è veramente significativo che in Gran Bretagna, una terra per secoli dilaniata da feroci guerre di religione, ogni anno la festa del 16 agosto diventi l'occasione per il fraterno incontro fra i cristiani di tutte le diverse confessioni; ed è davvero emozionante pensare che alla testa del corteo brilli la Croce di San Rocco, il *St. Rollox* della tradizione scozzese.



JIM THOMSON

«ROCH, RENAISSANCE ET CHEMINS DE FER. L'HISTOIRE DE ST. ROCH EN ÉCOSSE »

Cet essai revêt un caractère très particulier car, grâce à Jim Thomson – le correspondant écossais de notre «Centro Studi» – nous avons encore une fois un exemple des ressources extraordinaires que génère l'évocation de St Roch, même sur les terres lointaines de la Grande Bretagne.

Le culte est bien sûr circonscrit à une région d'Écosse, car les Catholiques représentent une minorité religieuse face aux Anglicans et Presbytériens. Cela n'empêche pas de constater que les seules traces du culte de St Roch encore visibles aujourd'hui sont d'origine anglaise; on peut en particulier visiter une chapelle construite sur une colline verdoyante de Chichester, appelée St Roque's Hill.

Elle fut détruite par les Protestants au XVIII siècle mais depuis 1997, elle revêt de nouveau une grande valeur symbolique. Chaque année pour le 16 août, on célèbre une messe oecuménique à ciel ouvert sur le lieu de l'ancienne chapelle. La procession fraternelle des chrétiens de toutes confessions se fait avec en tête la croix de St Roch, conservée dans l'église voisine de Singleton. C'est encore une fois un message de paix et de tolérance associé au charisme de St Roch.



JIM THOMSON

« ROCH, RENAISSANCE AND RAILWAYS. THE HISTORY OF SAINT ROCH/ROQUE IN SCOTLAND »

Thanks to our correspondent in Scotland we came to know of the existence of a cult of St. Roch in the distant land of Great Britain. Among the various related stories, a particularly moving one is that about the ancient chapel of St. Roche's Hill, where, since 1997, on the 16th of August is held an ecumenical celebration with an open-air mass; and it is the Cross of St. Roch that leads the brotherly procession of Christians of different confessions, umpteenth proof of the charisma of our Saint, symbol of peace and tolerance.



JIM THOMSON

« ROQUE, RENACIMIENTO Y FERROCARRILES. LA HISTORIA DE S. ROQUE EN ESCOCIA »

Gracias a Jim Thomson, nuestro corresponsal en Escocia, hemos tenido la posibilidad de conocer la existencia del culto de S. Roque en Gran-Bretaña. Entre las diferentes noticias, es particularmente emocionante la relativa a la antigua capilla de Saint Roche's Hill, donde, desde 1997, cada año el 16 de agosto, se celebra una misa ecuménica a cielo abierto; y la Cruz de S. Roque abre la procesión fraternal de los cristianos de todas las confesiones, prueba enésima del carisma de nuestro Santo, símbolo de paz y de tolerancia.

**Introduzione redazionale – Version française de Martine Gassier
English version by Domizia Parri – Versión española por Maria Luengo**



1. The Life of Saint Roch

According to *The Life of Saint Roch* by Francesco Diedo and to other traditions, Roch was born in 1295 in Montpellier in the south of France where his father was governor. After the death of his parents when Roch was still only about 20 years old he distributed his fortune among the poor and gave over to his uncle the government of Montpellier.

Like the great saints whom he admired, he decided to devote himself to the poor and needy and set out on a pilgrimage for Rome. On his way, he stopped at the town of Acquapendente where he came across a leper colony¹, and discovered his ability to cure the sick with the sign of the cross.

On his arrival in Rome he found that plague was rife in the great city and continued his work of curing the pestilence including the healing of a cardinal. He was received by the Pope and stayed in Rome for about three years.

He headed north and once again encountered the plague in the city of Piacenza where he, too, contracted the disease and retired to the seclusion of the woods near the town to await his fate.

It is said he was helped by a dog which brought him food and then by the dog's master, Gotthard, who took him in and nursed him back to health.

The story then becomes more vague when, on his return to Montpellier, he is not recognised and thrown into prison as a spy. Here he is said to have remained for five years until his death in 1327².

Recognised after his death by the birthmark of a cross on his chest, Roch is buried with the full honours of his rank in Montpellier.

Although his historical existence is now accepted, the dates and locations above have been called into question by scholars from «Italian Canon» Antonio Maurino and «French Canon» Augustin Fliche. Their alternative timetable has been described by François Pitangue³ and Paolo Ascagni⁴ as the «New Chronology».

THE DUAL CHRONOLOGIES OF ST. ROCH		
	TRADITIONAL CHRONOLOGY by Francesco Diedo	NEW CHRONOLOGY by Antonio Maurino & Augustin Fliche
Birth	1295	1345 / 1350
Death	1327	1376 / 1379

The «New Chronology» puts Roch's stay at Acquapendente to 1367 and his arrival in Rome at the beginning of 1368. Rather than returning to Montpellier with its implausible mistaken identity account, it is thought that he actually died in Voghera near Pavia and Piacenza, in northern Italy. This seems to have been where the cult of St.Roch originated as in the list of local festivals entered in the *Civil and Criminal Statutes* of the city, the festival of Saint Roch appears in 1382-

¹ Or group of plague victims – Accounts vary.

² See the DUAL CHRONOLOGIES table.

³ French historian – *Nouvelle contribution à l'étude de la vie authentique de l'histoire et des légendes de Mgr. saint Roch*, Montpellier 1984.

⁴ Italian historian, director of the «Centro Studi Rocchiano» (Center for Studies on St. Roch) – *San Rocco Pellegrino*, Venice 2007.

1391. The people of Montpellier, on the other hand, still invoked Saint Sebastian – the traditional «plague saint» – during the visitation of the plague in their city up to 1505. Both chronologies agree on the well-documented arrival of Roch's remains in Venice on 13th March 1485 (but more probably on 1483). It is said Montpellier had recognised its native saint by the building of a chapel there dedicated to him in 1421, but this tradition is not certain. His canonisation to sainthood was a "popular" process and it was finally officially authorised by different popes during XVI-XVII centuries. The cult of Saint Roch, at least in Italy, France and Spain, had begun in earnest.

2. St. Roch in England and Wales

In modern times we expect European trends to filter into Scotland via our English neighbour, but this is a fairly recent phenomenon. Indeed, the cult of Saint Roch seems to have virtually bypassed England and Wales with only one or two chapels dedicated to the French saint.

In Wales, only one chapel exists. It is situated just outside Bridgend, once part of a fortified area and near to the old pilgrim route of St. David.

Today this 15th century St. Roque's Chapel still stands, a picturesque, ivy-covered ruin, in the grounds of Methyr Mawr House, a private estate⁵.

There is a tentative plague – and definitely a pilgrim – connection in that the chapel was dedicated when the Stradlings took over the estate of Merthyr Mawr. *"As the first Stradling to own Methyrmawr (sic) ... died in Jerusalem, it is possible that the old chapel on the hill was rededicated to him"*⁶.

England itself has only two Roch(e) chapels. One is in Cornwall and among a plethora of sources for its origin only one⁷ subscribes to the theory that the parish *"takes its name from, and is dedicated to S. Roche, born in Montpellier"*⁸. Most ascribe the name to the spectacular outcrop of rock on the moorland above St. Austel. In fact, one author, Canon G. D. Doble is forthright in his condemnation of Tonkin's speculation. *"There is, needless to say, no foundation whatever for Tonkin's confident assertion that the parish is dedicated to St. Roch"*⁹. It would be a shame, however, not to mention this chapel of the hermit leper St. Gonand if only to show the photograph of its dramatic Cornish location.

Fortunately, the credentials of the second English chapel are more substantial. It stands on a hill known as «The Trundle»¹⁰ north of Chichester and overlooking Good-wood racecourse. The correct name for the hill is St. Roche's Hill, named after its 15th Century chapel. The chapel was mostly destroyed during the Reformation but remains were still visible in the early 18th Century.

Like Merthyr Mawr in Glamorgan, once more the chapel stands on a fortified mound and near a pilgrim route i.e. that to the shrine of St. Richard of Chichester. Again, the reason for the connection with St. Roch is obscure. There is an unusual assertion by Dr. Stephen Wilson that Roch was *"associated with the control of weather"*¹¹ and that a chapel on top of a hill would be an obvious place to dedicate to the saint. Later, this prominent site would be used for public hangings. The chapel and its association with St. Roch may well be lost in history but there is a living link which still exists between the saint and the people of the area.

To celebrate the 700th anniversary of St. Roch's birth¹² the feast day on 16th August 1997 saw the first open-air ecumenical service on the summit of *The Trundle* near the site of the old chapel – an event which has become an annual fixture. A St. Roche's Cross was specially made and is carried at the head of the procession up St. Roche's Hill on his feast day. For the rest of the year it stands in the chancel of nearby Singleton Church.

⁵ With thanks to the McLaggan family of Merthyr Mawr House, for their information and hospitality.

⁶ *St. Roque's Chapel Merthyrmawr* – Roderick G. Williams (courtesy of Glamorgan Archives).

⁷ Thomas Tonkin – C18th Cornish squire.

⁸ *Lake's Parochial History of the County of Cornwall*, vol. IV – Thomas Tonkin.

⁹ *Roche - the Arthurian Legend and the Saint of the Parish* – H. M. Cresswell Payne & Canon G. D. Doble.

¹⁰ From Old English «tryndle»: a circle.

¹¹ *The Magical Universe* – Dr. Stephen Wilson

¹² 1295 in the «Traditional chronology».

3. St. Roch in Scotland

The cult of Saint Roch in early 16th Century Scotland was attributable to one man, albeit a very powerful man. "*James IV was to prove the ablest and most popular of all the Stewart kings, a ruler of energy, intelligence and charm and a born leader of men, whose love for the good things of life was as intense as his religious fervour*"¹³.

It was this religious fervour that would lead him to build five chapels to Saint Roch¹⁴. James IV straddled two distinctive eras.

In the north of his kingdom the feudal clan system was still the core of society. Each person answered only to his own clan chief and events outwith the clan's territory, let alone the Scottish kingdom, had little or no impact on the highland or island Scot. James IV himself was a European monarch. He was well-educated and versed in several languages, acknowledged as very courageous and was devoutly religious. He was Scotland's "Renaissance King" ruling a country where, unlike the unruly north, the lowland part of James' kingdom was enjoying the fruits of literature, music, fashion, fine architecture, increased education (although still for the wealthy) and thriving commerce.

Quite how or why James became so devoted to St. Roch is open to conjecture. In the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, William Moir Bryce suggests that the various offerings made by the king and "*the appearance of the King himself at St. Roque's altar, surely implies the loss through the plague of some personal friend*".

He certainly took a remarkable attraction to the saint and in October of 1502 Treasurer's Accounts show payment "*giffin to the French Frere that brocht ane bane of Sanct Rowk to the King, be the Kingis command, xv Franch crounis*"¹⁵ i.e. that James had paid a French monk the sum of ten pounds ten shillings (Scots) to bring him a relic of St. Roch.

Stirling had been the first town to benefit from James' devotion to the saint. "*Now, in the course of 1499-1500, King James' attention seems to have been drawn to the alleged virtues of Saint Roque as the 'Patron of Pestilences' and he resolved to erect a chapel in his honour at Stirling, near the southern end of the old bridge over the Forth*"¹⁶. Accordingly, by letter under the Privy Seal¹⁷ and dated 17th February 1499-1500, he (i.e. James IV) appointed "*Schir Wilzame Hag to be chapellane to the chapel to be fundit by his gude grace in honour of Sanct Rok*"¹⁸. This would be on Raploch land just outside the town and later would have a small hospital attached – "*tae ger big ane hous to the seik folk at the brig end of Stirling*"¹⁹. Subsequent Treasurer's Accounts show gifts from the king to furnish and maintain the chapel including "*xv elne*²⁰ *lynnyn claith to Sanct Roches Chapell*"²¹ and a payment to the "*wrichtis*²² *of Sanct Rokis chapel*"²³.

The origin of Paisley chapel to the saint is obscure. Robert Brown's *History of Paisley* (vol. 1) attributes it to one Jacobi Crawford. It is unlikely that the monks of Paisley Abbey did not play some part in its erection and dedication and James IV had close links with the abbey. Certainly, James had a hand in its establishment as, once again, Treasurer's Accounts show a payment from him to the "*masonis and werkmen of Paslay, of drinksilver*"²⁴.

This chapel, too, had a hospital and cemetery and has records of its accommodation of sufferers of plague and leprosy until the 17th Century, later becoming an alms-house.

Little is known, either, about Dundee's chapel except that "*the chapel of St. Roque, or Roche, stood without the town on the east, by the side of he sparkling Wallace burn*"²⁵ "*near to the*

¹³ *A Concise History of Scotland* – Fitzroy Maclean

¹⁴ The saint's name will appear in a variety of spellings.

¹⁵ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vol. 2, p. 346.

¹⁶ *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. 10, p. 172 – William Moir Bryce.

¹⁷ *Privy Seal Reg.*, p. 476.

¹⁸ *Of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. 10 – William Moir Bryce

¹⁹ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vol. 2, p. 121.

²⁰ 15 ells = 16 m (approx.). An ell was an old measure of length = 3 feet 9 inches = double forearm.

²¹ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vol. 3, p. 68.

²² Wrights.

²³ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vol. 2, p. 141.

²⁴ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vol. 2.

²⁵ *Old Dundee Prior to the Reformation* – Alexander Maxwell

locality of 'Semirookie'²⁶ or St. Roque's Lane"²⁷. "The chapel being sited near the temporary lodgings erected for those afflicted by the plague, the churchyard was probably used as the burial-ground for plague victims"²⁸.

Not unexpectedly, Edinburgh's St. Roque's Chapel is the best documented of all these Scottish buildings. We even have pictorial evidence of its existence in a Victorian print of its ruins, remarkably similar to the little chapel of St. Roque in Methyr Mawr. It was built on the Burgh Muir where victims of the frequent outbreaks of plague were traditionally segregated.

"This position bears evidence of having been specially selected as the most distant from the city, and the least frequented portion of the Muir"²⁹. The area was known as the lands of Canaan.

"Although from the Lord Treasurer's Accounts we learn that King James IV, when riding across the Muir, gave 12 pence in alms «to ane seik wif³⁰ on the mure of Edinburgh», it is only in 1507 that the chapel on the Muir appears for the first time on record"³¹.

William Moir Bryce goes on to tell us that in 1507 "the King had so timed his journey that he arrived at the chapel on the 16th of August ... Sanct Rowkis Day"³². Again, we have records of donations from the king to this little chapel.

James made at least two more visits to the chapel of Saint Roque, the second of which was the most significant. "James IV commanded all able-bodied men between the ages of sixteen and sixty to muster on Edinburgh's Burrow Muir (near the chapel) prior to marching to the disaster at Flodden"³³. James and many of the Scottish nobility – the «Flowers of the Forest» – would not return from the catastrophic Battle of Flodden: a dark episode in Scottish history.

4. The Glasgow Chapel of St. Roche and the St. Rollox «Brand»

We have few records, no Treasurer's Accounts and no illustrations of St. Roche's Chapel in Glasgow but this would be the one which would take his name worldwide as a 'brand' rather than as a man of God.

We can see from the 16th Century map of Glasgow the St. Roche's Chapel stood north of the cathedral glebe and, for reasons which have become apparent throughout, well out of the town "a little way without the Stable-green port"³⁴.

According to an early 20th Century History of Glasgow, the city "seems to have had a visitation of the pest in 1504, as in a protocol dated 5th June of that year it is stated that a chaplain and vicar of the choir, named Sir John Brakanrig, lay at the point of death 'ex morbo pestifero' in the house of «Patrick Hammiltoun alias John Elphinstoun»"³⁵.

Two years later, Glasgow had its own 'plague chapel' and lands. "On 20th June 1506, in presence of the archbishop and the president and chapter, assembled in the chapter-house of the cathedral, Sir Andrew Burell, chaplain, appeared and ... assigned to Sir Thomas Forbas, chaplain to the church of Saint Roche, founded and about to be built in the territory of Glasgow, a tenement³⁶ and yard lying in the Ratounraw (Rottenrow)"³⁷.

Like the other St. Roch chapels the tenement and land would provide for an adjacent hospital and cemetery. By 1830 historian John McUre reports that "there is no vestige remaining of the building, but the yard around it is still conspicuous, and some persons of distinction of the city, who died of pestilence anno 1645, and 1646, were buried there"³⁸.

²⁶ A diminutive form of Roch, with the post-Reformation omission of the 'Saint' title.

²⁷ *Medieval Dundee* – Elizabeth Torrie.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. 10 – William Moir Bryce.

³⁰ Sick woman.

³¹ *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. 10 – William Moir Bryce.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Historic South Edinburgh*, vol. 1, p. 2 – Charles J. Smith

³⁴ *History of Glasgow*, p. 62 – John McUre (1830).

³⁵ *History of Glasgow*, vol. 1, p. 287 – Robert Renwick & Sir John Lindsay.

³⁶ I.e. a building (not 'tenement' as we recognise it today).

³⁷ *History of Glasgow*, vol. 1, p. 288 – Robert Renwick & Sir John Lindsay.

³⁸ *History of Glasgow*, p. 62 – John McUre (1830).

The demise of the chapel did not, however, extinguish the name of St. Roch or, more commonly its diminutive pseudonym, St. Rollox, in the north east of Glasgow. The St. Rollox name would become more internationally famous than the saint himself had ever been.

It began innocuously enough with the building of a limehouse on the site in the early 19th Century. Its owner, too, came from humble beginnings, but the entrepreneurial skills of Charles Tennant would set him among the great industrialists of that industrial century.

A linen-bleacher to trade, Charles Tennant discovered a system where work that normally took months could be done in a matter of hours. Tennant's new method saved over £150,000 in Ireland, the home of linen production, in its first year alone. With his invention successfully patented and the wealth which subsequently accrued, he became a respected member of Glasgow's merchant class and by the time he died suddenly in 1838 his simple limehouse had become a full-scale chemical works bearing the name of St. Rollox. Its chimney – Tennant's Stalk – was said to be the highest in Europe.

By that time, too, the Monkland Canal and the Garnkirk railway helped to encourage industry in that part of Glasgow, the new railways being so important that several locomotive works were established in the Springburn and Garngad areas of the city. One of the most important of these was the Caledonian Railway Works at St. Rollox exporting the St. Rollox "brand" across the globe. St. Roch had achieved worldwide fame at last!

An added irony to this situation was that the expansion of both St. Rollox factories coincided with the migration from Ireland of victims fleeing the 'blight' or potato famine. Intending to emigrate to the promised land of the United States, the poorest could afford to go no further than the British cities of Liverpool and Glasgow. Many of them settled in Glasgow's Garngad taking up employment in the surrounding railway works. As many of these immigrants were Roman Catholic, a need became apparent to provide a Catholic church for the Garngad area. This church, built in 1907, was dedicated to a certain French saint from the town of Montpellier – St. Roch!

JIM THOMSON

Jim Thomson was born in 1950 in the east end of Glasgow in Scotland; he became a primary school teacher with two periods of his career spent at «*St. Roch's Primary*» in the city's Garngad/Royston area – one as a classroom teacher and one as Assistant Headteacher. Having moved from Glasgow to Balfron, in the Stirlingshire country-side, he became Vice-Chairman of the «*Scottish Local History Forum*». Recently became involved in researching historical material for «*St. Roch's Primary*» School's centenary in 2007 and produced as a result the essay published in this site; also as part of those festivities, he composed a "*Cantata for children*" which is due to be performed at the launch of the school's centennial celebrations.

Jim Thomson è nato nel 1950 nella *East end* di Glasgow, in Scozia; insegnante di scuola elementare, in due periodi della sua carriera ha lavorato presso la scuola *Saint Roch* di Glasgow, nella zona di Garngad/Royston, prima come insegnante di classe, successivamente come Assistente alla Presidenza. Trasferitosi da Glasgow a Balfron, nella campagna dello Stirlingshire, ha assunto la carica di vice-presidente della «*Scottish Local History Forum*» (forum di storia locale scozzese). Per l'anno 2007, in previsione del tradizionale centenario di san Rocco, è stato incaricato di predisporre una ricerca storica per la scuola elementare *Saint Roch* di Glasgow, da cui è scaturito il saggio sopra riportato; sempre nell'ambito di tale ricorrenza, ha composto una "*Cantata per bambini*", eseguita durante le solenni celebrazioni della scuola.

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